

MUSCLES

ARE
BETTER
THAN

MAGIC!

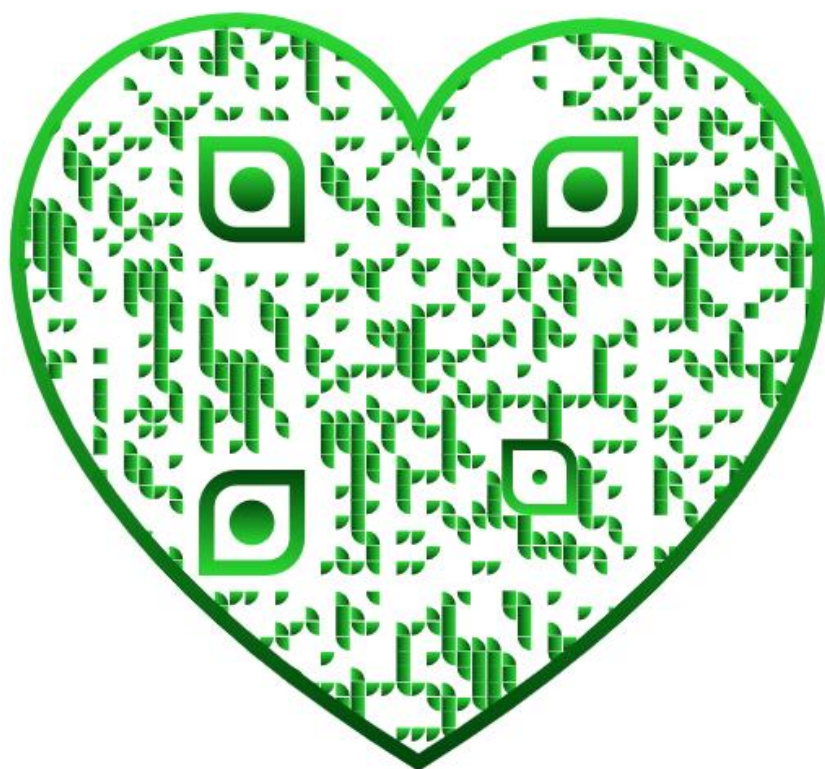


NOVEL

1

WRITTEN BY
DORANEKO

ILLUSTRATED BY
RELUCY



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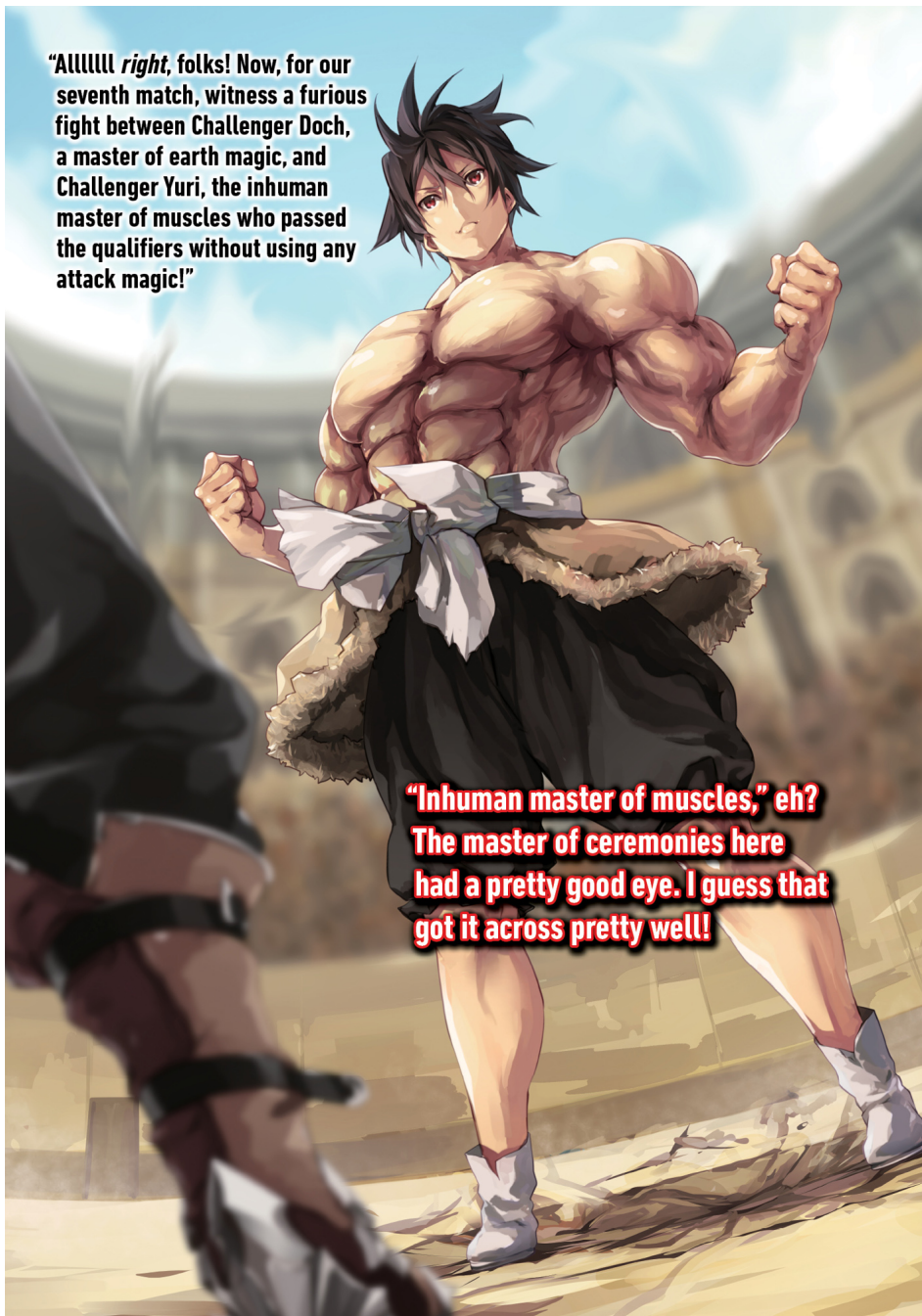
VOLTEMA

BABANDONGAS

GRIM REAPER

"Alllllll *right*, folks! Now, for our seventh match, witness a furious fight between Challenger Doch, a master of earth magic, and Challenger Yuri, the inhuman master of muscles who passed the qualifiers without using any attack magic!"

"Inhuman master of muscles," eh? The master of ceremonies here had a pretty good eye. I guess that got it across pretty well!"





MUSCLES **ARE BETTER THAN MAGIC!**

NOVEL



WRITTEN BY
DORANEKO

ILLUSTRATED BY
RELUCY



Seven Seas Entertainment

MAHO? SONNAKOTOYORI KINNIKU DA! VOL.1

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Illustrated by Relucy

First published in Japan in 2017 by
KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
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Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com.
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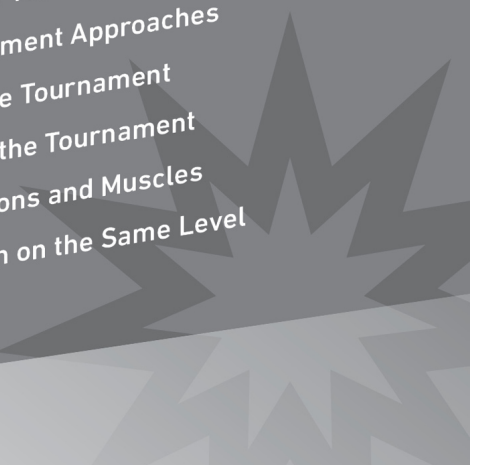
TRANSLATION: Timothy MacKenzie
ADAPTATION: M.B. Hare
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
PROOFREADER: Brian Kearney, Kelly Lorraine Andrews
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: E.M. Candon
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64505-938-7
Printed in Canada
First Printing: January 2021
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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Prologue: A Chance Meeting in the Forest

“**W**HOA, WHOA, WHOA!” A hulking monster blocked my way through the dense, overgrown forest. “Dang, you’re a huge one, aintcha?”

The monster’s body was covered in thick black hair. It had to be twice my size, maybe more. Assuming that bulk wasn’t just for show, this toothy furball could probably pack a powerful punch.

I just couldn’t stop the corners of my mouth from curving into a grin. I’d spent over ten years in this deadly forest, and I could tell the monster in front of me was a top-tier nasty-strong son of a gun.

Nice.

Going all out in a death match with something that powerful? I was so happy I could hardly stand it!

“GRAAAHH!”

Seeing me smile—which, okay, was maybe a *little* inappropriate—the monster let out a roar and flew into a rage. Giving in to its violent fury, it rushed straight at me. Its movements were quick, its huge body belying a hidden agility. Um, nice? Rad as *hell*?

“Come on, let’s go! Hooah!”

I swung my fist at the oncoming mass of shaggy death. In the next instant, my fist and the monster’s claws collided. With a satisfying snap the monster’s claws shattered and went flying.

The monster couldn’t hide its shock at this setback. When in a battle to the death, that kind of pause is fatal. Without losing an ounce of focus, I swung my fist again with the same force.

Crack! I connected directly with the monster’s abdomen and it sailed several hundred miles through the air. In the distance, trees tumbled and collapsed as the monster’s bulk careened into the depths of the forest.

The last thing I heard was a thunderous roar reverberating through the dark. When I tracked the monster down, all I found was its

lifeless body.

“Welp,” I said with a shrug, looking over the mass of fallen trees and the cratered ground. “I’ve seen better.”

“Whew, what a catch! This is going to fill me right up!”

A lone man made his way home, looking in high spirits. That guy just so happened to be me, and I was strolling through the lush forest to my little cottage while I lugged my massive, freshly slain monster.

Though when I stopped and thought about it, I realized I’d better wash before I got back. I’d gotten a little scuffed in that last battle, after all. I stopped by the lake on the way to clean myself up.

When I looked into the water’s surface, I saw the reflection of blue sky and white clouds above, and beneath? Yours truly. Black eyes in the front, black hair up top, all rippling in the lake. Pretty unusual color combination, or so I’ve read. I’m, oh, around five seven—average, you know?—though I’m a bit beefier than your average joe. That’s what the books I’d found indicated, at least.

As for the name, it’s Yuri. Since I didn’t really have any parent-types around, I decided on the name for myself. Came in second place behind “Beefcake.” I think I was probably around eighteen years old.

I say “probably” because I don’t remember exactly when I wound up in that forest. By the time I was really aware of things, I was just... there, by myself. So yeah, no certain age and a name I had to pick all on my own, but it was what it was. Honestly, aside from the whole “living in a secluded forest” thing, I was probably a normal sort of guy you’d find anywhere.

“All right. Time to head home.”

After getting myself all squeaky clean, I once again started back toward my cottage.

“Still, gotta say, I sure was lucky to run into such a hefty monster.”

Aw yeah, I’d be livin’ it up for a while after a good hunt like that. I puffed out my chest, envisioning the rich meals in store. Heck, if I

fried it on up, I could stuff my face with it right quick.

Just as I was thinking about getting the proper fixings together for a good fry, I felt something strange. The air around me was tense. It's difficult to put into words, but it clearly felt *different* from the usually peaceful atmosphere of my forest home. When I searched for signs of what might be off, I found indications that there was someone or *something* in the area near my cottage.

Another monster?

"Now that's what you call luck!" I exclaimed. Another battle already!

Heart pounding, I broke into a run, my soon-to-be-fried prey still slung over my shoulder. Fortunately for me, my little abode was just a stone's throw away.

Now then, what kinda monster was this new one going to be? The stronger the better, if you asked me. I was still jonesing for a rampage. Blood pumping, ready to punch, I finally skidded to a stop in the clearing before my front door.

Except the prey I'd been dreaming of wasn't there. It was just... some strange girl standing out front.

"This is a house, isn't it?" she muttered to herself, staring at my little forest home. It seemed like she hadn't noticed me yet because she was in a daze. Thinking to herself, apparently. I took the opportunity to cautiously assess her.

Silver hair, silver eyes, and long, pointed ears. She didn't seem to be a human like me, more like she was a different race entirely. The feature that really drew me in was her face—she was beautiful! She was cute, lovely, and just *elegant*, ya know? It was like her face was molded into the embodiment of all the world's beauty, and for a few moments, I couldn't take my eyes off her. Above the waist, she wore a form-fitting white top that showed off her curves, and below the waist she wore a loose, flowing skirt.

Even at a glance, her style floored me. She looked about one fist shorter than me, and her waist was long and slender. Although her chest wasn't the biggest, so what? She was basically an exquisite work of art, a masterpiece.

I could barely believe she was just *here* in front of my house.

Though more startling than her beauty was the fact that *anyone* was here. All this time living in the forest and I'd rarely ever actually seen another person. I definitely never thought someone else would wander this deep into the savage, untamed woods...

Ohhhh, no, *that* had to be it. I wasn't suffering from some kind of head-over-heels love-at-first-sight thing, I just couldn't control the throbbing of my heart because I hadn't met another person in such a long time. That was what was going on. Yeah, definitely.

While my mind was bouncing all over the place, the mysterious beauty was lost in thought, her finger on her chin and a pensive look on her face.

"Why is there a cottage here of all places? Should I try and...go inside? No, this isn't the time to hesitate."

It seemed she still hadn't noticed me. In that case, I had to try get her attention. I calmed down—deep breath, come on, Yuri—and called out to the lady. "Hail, stranger. What, uh, business do you have at my humble abode?"

"Whaa?!" She let out a shriek that seemed unbecoming of an elegant woman like herself. The look she gave me was completely shocked. "I-I'm sorry. You surprised me..."

"Oh, no, no, *I'm* sorry for surprising you like that. It's just, uh, this is the first time I've met someone else in the forest. What are you even doing here, though?"

"I just wanted directions. Can you help me get out of here?"

She explained that her name was Filia Windia, and she was a seventeen-year-old elf. (And you know, I'd read that elves were famously beautiful, but I never imagined they could be as goddess-level gorgeous as Filia.) A-anyway, from the sound of it, she'd wandered into the forest and now she didn't know how to get back home.

As I listened to her story, I crossed my arms and frowned contemplatively at the elf standing in front of me.

She tilted her head up at me as if trying to guess what I was thinking. Her long eyelashes fluttered so prettily when she blinked.

"I see, I see," I said, nodding sagely. "So, in short...um, say, what's your name again?"

"Didn't I introduce myself to you a minute ago? My name is *Filia*,

Fi-li-a. Ah, however, if you wish to call me ‘the transcendently beautiful elf Miss Filia,’ I wouldn’t be opposed. How do you like the sound of *that*, hm?” Filia beamed, pressing a finger to her chin.

All right, all right! Sure, she was cute, but there was no need to get carried away. Still...

“Well, all right, I guess. So, in short, oh, transcendently beautiful elf Miss Filia—”

“Ah! No, I’m sorry! Please just call me Filia, that’s fine!”

“But...you just told me yourself you wanted me to call you that.”

“Yeah, yeah, but hearing it out loud is way more embarrassing than I expected it to be...”

Filia averted her eyes as if to avoid my gaze. Her light cheeks, so pale as to almost be transparent, reddened with a blush.

“Well, let me see if I’ve got this—you’re Filia, you’re an elf, and after leaving your elf village for the first time, you were feeling confident. You charged headfirst into this unfamiliar forest and found yourself unable to find your way home. Is that right?” I asked.

“That sums it up.”

“Hm.”

I squinted at this so-called elf before me. Weren’t elves supposed to have a certain level of awareness of the dangers of a forest? I would’ve thought even a happy-go-lucky toddler wouldn’t blithely rush into my monster-infested woods.

Perhaps it was because she noticed my scrutiny, but Filia spoke up again, more words wandering from her pink lips. “I’m kind of a careless girl sometimes. But even that part of me is cute, don’t you think?”

“You sure call yourself cute a lot.” Cute on the outside, kinda conceited on the inside. “That’s beside the point, I guess. What matters is that you’re lost.”

“No, no. Lost is such a, ah, perilous word. I’ve never been lost in my life. I just...don’t know where I am in this specific forest.”

“That is what the word ‘lost’ means, yes.”

Filia hung her head low. “Ugh! So mean! Here I am, struggling to escape from my harsh reality, but you bring me crashing down into despair with your offhanded remarks? The humanity! The horror!”

What was *with* this lady? The words you use to describe reality don't change reality. I didn't understand a lick of what she wanted. This incomprehensible girl covered her chest with one hand and pointed accusingly at me with her other.

"To take such pleasure in plunging me into despair...is that your kink? You've scandalized me! The raw nerve!"

"Find your way out yourself, then."

"I—oh goodness, I'm ever-so-sorry! Please forgive me, Mr. Forest Man, I'm begging you!" Filia bowed.

If someone else had happened upon us at that moment, I was sure I was the one who'd look like the bad guy. At least there was no one for miles and miles to lay eyes on our mess.

Still... I peered at Filia as she stood before me, bowing low. Were all elves this weird? Or no, were they all just full of themselves? To think just that morning I'd thought of elves as prancing pictures of perfection. How utterly disappointing. Then again, that sort of elf sounded stiff and uptight.

On the other hand, maybe the reason I was nursing this odd interest in Filia, the reason she'd instantly caught my attention, was because she wasn't just the first person I'd met in a long time, she also felt...I don't know, easy to talk to?

We connected with each other.

All right, then. My task? To lead Filia out of the forest. I could at least help her with that. And I'd be happy to, even! Just one itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny tiny problem...

"Okay, let's do this. Maybe we can find the way out together."

"Find the way out toge—excuse me? You just said 'I'm not going to tell you the way' all high and mighty and you didn't know it to begin with? Are you serious?"

Ah, yeah, I'd said that earlier, huh? Oops.

"Sorry. No worries though, forget about it."

"The barbarity! The cruelty! Trampling upon a maiden's pure, innocent heart! There shall be consequences! Reparations!" Filia glared at me.

Buuuut she was pretty tiny, so it was like being menaced by a

kitten.

“Cool. First, though, I think we gotta handle *that*.” I pointed behind Filia.

Filia followed my finger and there it was: a carnivorous plant-monster with writhing purple tentacles. The thing had crept up while we were talking; I hadn’t even sensed the little sneak till right then.

“Yeeeeeagh?!” Filia, once again letting out another very un-elfen cry, immediately put distance between herself and the monster. Now she stood beside me, her body trembling at the sight of the writhing tentacles.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Filia moaned. “A...a tentacle monster? Gross, gross, *grosssss*! I’ve never seen anything so...squirming? Ohhh it’s so bad to see... Let’s get out of here as fast and far as possible! Please?”

I snorted. “C’mon, have you never eaten one of those tentacles? They’re delicious!”

Filia, who’d been slowly but surely backing away in retreat, stopped in her tracks. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

When you roasted the tentacles, they gave off a unique aroma. Just delicious eatin’. Even in this forest full of tasty monsters, you could really get addicted to these guys. I’d give it second place in tastiness. No, first. Argh, it’s so hard to decide!

Filia nodded slowly at first, then with more certitude. “Let’s fight it then, shall we? If we run away, I will bring shame to the name of elves.”

Filia-now was completely different from Filia-before. She looked ready to fight—calm and calculating, even.

Still, I stood in front of her. “It just so happens I’ve had a craving for this guy. Lemme handle it.”

Now that I thought about it, I hadn’t really eaten anything in a while. I was so hungry I felt like I was gonna die. Nah, I’d kill the monster quick and get it in my belly pronto. Meal solved, starvation avoided.

“Are you going to be okay? That monster seems pretty strong,”

said Filia.

“Hm? Oh, yeah, sure, just leave it to me.” I turned behind me to where Filia stood. As I did, Filia’s expression changed from one of unease to straight-up panic, like she’d been cornered.

“Watch out! In front of you! Yuri, in front!”

“Yeah?”

I pivoted back around just as she said to and got a face-full of wind spell for my troubles. The monster’s sharp blades of air slammed into my body, kicking up clouds of dust.

“N-no!” Filia shouted, her voice trembling.

Maybe she thought I was dead? Understandable, I guess. No worries, though. With my well-trained leg muscles, I shot out of the dust cloud and landed right up close to the monster.

“Let’s go!”

I closed the distance with a lunge, spun, and delivered a light punch to the dumbstruck monster’s belly. The monster let out a pained cry and collapsed. Its tentacles wiggled and writhed for a bit, but it wasn’t long before they too went still.

“Whew...”

With the beastie taken care of, I dragged its corpse back to where Filia stood.

“Wh-what just happened?” For some reason, Filia’s silver eyes were wide open and her mouth hung agape. Something must have given her quite a shock.

“Ah, right, so, magic doesn’t really have an effect on me. Because of my training and all.”

That training was the reason why I could live alone in this monster-ific forest. At this point, my body was so toned that I hadn’t met any kind of magic that could so much as dent it. So, you know, spells didn’t really concern me. Fire magic, water magic, lightning magic, wind magic, or earth magic, you-name-the-magic, it all just poofed into nothin’ against my ripped bod. There was no advantage quite like it, especially in mortal combat. It was the foundation of my survival.

That’s muscles for you. Muscles are strong, and beautiful. Sacred.

All things come down to muscle.

“Magic has little effect...? Because you’ve *trained*...? That sounds like...like complete nonsense...right?” Filia mumbled, seemingly astonished. Some weird elf stuff, I guess.

“Look, whatever, the point is, my rad muscles block magic. Facts are facts.”

Filia folded her arms. “That’s soooo unfair!”

“What’re you, a child?” I let out an involuntary laugh at her pettiness. “C’mon, let’s chow down before we leave the forest. You’re gonna eat too, right?”

“Hmph. I will accept your offer. I...suppose I’m eager to see what those tentacles might taste like. Yes, I’m excited to try!”

“Well, come on, then, let’s head on inside.”

And so the first visitor to my humble cottage in the deadly-as-heck forest was Filia, the weird and kinda spoiled elf.

“Phew, I really pigged out...” I leaned back in my chair and admired the pile of empty wooden plates piled on the little table between me and my house guest. Not a scrap of purple tentacle remained.

“Yeah,” said Filia, rubbing her belly, “I couldn’t take another bite.”

“You thought it would taste awful,” I mused, “but look at you now!”

Filia’s cheeks flushed red. “W-well, that’s because those tentacles let out that weird whistling sound while you were frying them!”

“Yeah, that happens.”

“And then after biting into them, they let out that horrid death cry and started casting wind magic!”

“Yep, kinda what they do.”

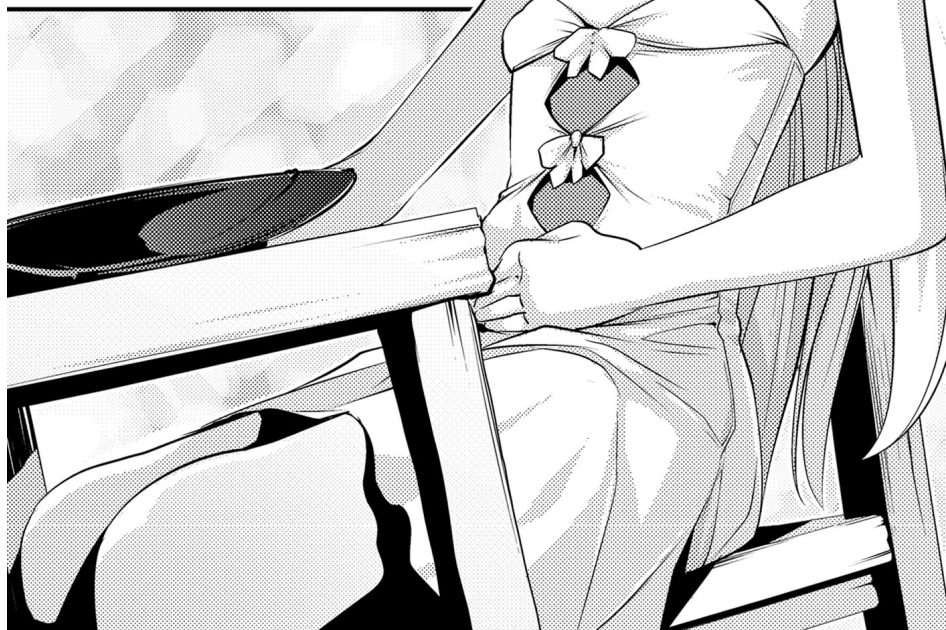
“So,” she said, very slowly, “anyone with common sense would think that it definitely wouldn’t qualify as a tasty experience then,

wouldn't you agree?"

I mean, I got where she was coming from, I guess. "But, how was it, really? Was it gross?"

Given how close we both were to food-coma territory, I didn't even need to hear her answer.

Filia responded in a quiet voice, as if admitting defeat herself. "It was...delicious. Positively delectable. Thank you so very much for the meal."



“Welp, hey, no problem. My pleasure, matter-of-fact.”

“Ugh...” She gave me an odd look. “This feels somewhat humiliating, for some reason....”

Filia was glaring at me now, embarrassed, but I didn’t pay it any mind. Honestly, I was kind of stuck on the amount of food she’d stuffed down her gullet. As full as she said she was, she’d eaten barely a tenth of what I had.

“I sorta thought you were gonna be the kind of glutton who eats like a horse,” I admitted. “But you didn’t actually eat that much at all.”

Even though she kept going on about how delicious the food was, how much she couldn’t get enough of it, all of that stuff—it seemed like she was at an impasse with her tiny elf stomach.

“I do want to eat more, but I get full really quickly.” Filia sighed. “I’m jealous of people like you who can eat as much as their heart desires, Yuri.”

“You know, you do look really thin. Wouldn’t it be better if you put on a few pounds?” I asked, examining Filia’s body once more.

Even though she said her belly was packed, her slender figure remained unchanged. When I stared at Filia like that though, she crossed her arms as if to hide herself from view.

“The humanity! The insensitivity! Taking advantage of the lull after a meal to defile me in your mind! Horrid.”

“Don’t just accuse me of being a creep!”

“What? Am I wrong? Oh, well, that’s nice, then,” she replied with a light, teasing laugh. Then she stood, stretched, and let out a satisfied post-meal grunt. “Thank you ever-so-much for the meal, Yuri. It really was marvelous, I hope you know, and certainly *I* should know. That being said, it seems about time for me to go. The road goes ever on or whatever.”

“Wait.” I called out to Filia just as she set foot outside my door.

She tilted her head to the side as if to say “What’s the matter?”

“Honestly?” I scratched the back of my head. “I want to leave the forest, too. Is it okay if I go with you? It doesn’t have to be any farther than the outskirts.”

I’d never felt lonely living on my own...not until that moment.

Unnameable dissatisfaction didn't haunt me or anything like that. There was even a sense of achievement in being able to eat what I hunted with my own two hands. But now...now I knew somebody. I knew Filia. And yeah, she was strange, but she didn't seem bad. She was, I don't know, likeable.

I hadn't even thought about leaving the forest before. Maybe I had been unconsciously avoiding entertaining the thought. But after just a few hours with Filia, my suppressed interest in the outside world was overflowing.

I wanted to know more about all kinds of things.

I wanted to go to all kinds of places.

I wanted to meet all kinds of people.

And, above all else, I wanted to become stronger. For the sake of Muscle Itself.

In an instant, those feelings filled my heart and spilled out into my enormous and totally ripped pecs. How ripped was I, really? What dangerous wonders could this body—this positively *shredded* body with its tree-trunk limbs and glistening rock-hard abs—withstand? The burning desire of this totally cut bod could not, would not be quenched!

So, uh, also to note, I'd apparently been saying most of this out loud. Filia, after listening to me wax on for a bit, looked up for a moment, like she was hesitating.

"Well, then," she said, "yes, how about we go together? I just left my home village too, so I'm feeling a little anxious. In fact, I believe I find your...bigness reassuring, Yuri."

"Whoo! Thanks for having me along! You will *not* regret it!"

And just like that, I decided to leave my forest home. I'd spent nearly my entire life in the trees, so I was feeling a bit emotional. But the other rush of emotion was so much better: excitement and joy and hot-blooded anticipation! We were going out to see a world filled to bursting with new adventures!

Chapter 1: Carrying a Handkerchief Is Common Sense

“**I** STILL CAN’T SEE the exit. Yuri, how’s your energy level? Are you okay?”

Filia and I were trudging through the forest. We’d left my cottage first thing in the morning but by the time she asked that, the sun was shining down from directly above us. Despite walking a considerable distance over the last few hours, Filia didn’t appear to be out of breath at all. Even though she looked rather frail, she had way more stamina than you’d think. More than that, *she* was the one worrying about *my* physical condition.

“Yeah, I’m okay. Actually, I’m surprised you’re still so peppy, Filia,” I said, though I held back the true degree of my admiration. For all Filia’s marching, she had only the slightest sheen of sweat.

Filia just chuckled, puffing out her modest chest. A smug grin crept across her face. “Well, you know, elves are people of the forest, after all. A journey outside of the forest would be one thing, but inside? This is but a trifle!”

“But that ‘people of the forest’ thing still doesn’t cover getting *lost* in the forest, to be clear.”

“Shh! You promised you wouldn’t bring that up again!”

In the midst of our bickering, we heard a sound from straight ahead. It was like someone pushing their way through tall grass, clover-patches, and bushes. It was nothing like the gentle sway of grass in the wind. No, this was the shift and crunch of someone—or *something*—approaching. And when you heard that in the woods, it generally meant one thing.

“A monster.”

As if on cue, the creature leaped out from the shadows between the trees.

“Well then, guess it’s my turn to show off my power, isn’t it?” said Filia, sliding into a ready stance.

The monster shambled on four legs, and in terms of height, it came up to around Filia's waist. One majestic horn sprouted from its forehead, and I did recognize it from my prior monster-wrasslin' experience: even for a specimen of this forest, it was notably strong. Its meat wasn't all that good for eating, so it didn't really offer much bang for your buck (the bang being dinner and the buck being hot-blooded *action*), so I didn't think about it too often. I couldn't even remember its name.

"A gargas, huh? I can't afford to go easy on one of those," said Filia.

Oh, that's right. It was called a "gargas"!

"Please die," said Filia politely.

Filia aimed her palm at the monster, shot me a casual smile, and sent a blade of water hurtling at the beast. The water blade whistled through the air, lightning-fast, and a brief hard crack cleaved the monster in two effortlessly clean slices from mouth to tail. Completely annihilated. Hadn't even had a second to cry out.

Filia looked it over for a moment, just in case, before turning around to face me. "There you go. I used water magic just now, but, of course, that is merely one of my many skills. I am versed in other forms of magic as well, such as fire magic, lightning magic, wind magic, and, oh goodness, we simply cannot forget recovery magic. Quite useful, that! As long as I have magical energy, I can even regrow a lost arm. Although, such an injury is impossible to heal if too long a time has passed. That's why one must always keep a little energy in reserve. Just in case, you know."

"That's incredible," I blurted.

I'd had my doubts about whether Filia would even survive getting lost in my forest for very long, given all the powerful monsters strutting about. But if she was this powerful, I never needed to worry at all. Being able to regrow a lost arm probably meant she was a magician of considerable ability.

As I gaped at Filia, she just waved her hand back and forth, as if to say it was nothing.

"Tut-tut," she actually said aloud, "you can't be *that* surprised! I'm an elf, after all. Such arcane talent is innate. As a matter of fact, I still have a long way to go. To put it crassly, this is not even my final form."

“Well, even if you’re an elf and all, that doesn’t necessarily mean you’d be able to use all that magic right away just after being born, right? You’ve really put the work in! You’re pretty amazing if you ask me, Filia, and not just because you’re an elf.”

I have a powerful admiration for magic. I mean, being able to conjure fire or water from nothing? Anyone should admire that. Even some bumpkin like me who lives in the forest has wondered how difficult it would be to study magic and how much you’d have to struggle with it. How many years did it take to attain Filia’s level of magical power, not to mention five different kinds of it?! Just how long had she worked? I couldn’t imagine.

“R-really? Um. Thank you,” Filia took a deep breath. “Thank you so much.”

Filia twirled her silver hair with her finger, as if she were bashful, or maybe unused to praise? That was a kinda surprising reaction. If she was able to use magic on this level, I personally thought she deserved a little pride.

“I-It’s not like I’m feeling embarrassed or anything though!” she snapped, puffing out her modest chest and pointing directly at me—though she immediately crossed her arms in front of said chest. “And now it’s ‘modest chest,’ is it? What a terrible pervert you are, Yuri! Disgust! Betrayal!”

“How do you know what I’m thinking?” I asked after she went through a few other one-word expressions of horror.

“Oh, you know. Telepathy. Impressive, hm? I can read the minds of the unwary. Which means *you*, in this particular case. How about that? Amazing, isn’t it? What a talent our beloved Filia has!” Filia cried, setting her hand on her hips and once again puffing out her slim chest.

“That’s...*really* amazing.”

Even if she could only use it when people were being careless, reading minds could offer a considerable advantage in a fight. While I was standing there thinking about how cool it all was, Filia’s eyes widened for a moment. Then, at once, she turned her back to me.

“P-please don’t look at me for a little while.” She sniffed. Wait, no. That was a *sniffle*. Oh no.

“D-did I say something bad? I’m sorry! Forgive me!”

She was crying? But why? What had I said?! Was it something hurtful? When I went over it in my head, all I found was a great big void where my interpersonal experiences should be. What had I done?

Filia's back was to me and her shoulders were trembling. Slowly—I guess because she sympathized with me, or maybe because she could read my mind—she explained: “It’s not that you said anything bad.” Sniff. Hiccup. “It’s just, ah, I feel a little happy.”

“Happy?”

“Mmhm.” Sniff. “It’s because you...you said I’m amazing! The people back in my village, they called it creepy. Telepathy and stuff. Can you, umm,” sniff, nose-blow, sniff, sniff, snifffff, “can you please lend me a handkerchief?”

I handed Filia my handkerchief while her back was still to me. Filia extended her pale, slender arm and took it. She wiped away her tears, blew her nose, and handed the gunked-up thing right on back.

“Hey, uh. You know, this is someone else’s handkerchief?”

“It’s okay.” Sniff, snuffffffff, snoffffffff, snaffffffff. “Because I just so happen to be a most beautiful lady.”

“I don’t get what that’s supposed to mean.”

Puzzling as it all was, at least she wasn't crying anymore. With all that out of her system, Filia seemed a little more back to her normal bewildering self.

I took a deep breath and decided it was okay to start talking again. Her eyes were still red, but she seemed mostly all right. “Feeling better?”

“Ha. Hmph. Usually at times like this, forest-man, people would say something like ‘you can cry on my chest’ or something.”

"You can cry on my chest."

“Well, I’m *done* with that part. Besides, I’m not an easy woman,” she added, her eyes still red and swollen. Then, after a few seconds of silence, she opened her mouth once more. “It isn’t as though it didn’t make me happy. Because you praised me and such. So. Thank you.”

Filia suddenly giggled cutely. That smiling face of hers could enchant anyone. Even so, something like “it’s not as though it didn’t make me happy” sounded so strange, as if her words were doing

gymnastics. Wouldn't "it made me happy" be just fine? She really did have trouble expressing herself honestly, and it was worse than I'd thought.

But it was also a *little* funny. I felt the corners of my mouth curve into a smile.

"Well, I just said what I was thinking," I said, "there's no need for you to thank me. Besides, I want you to tell me what you think, too. You think these muscles are cool, right?"

"Your muscles are...cool? I'm afraid I don't understand." Filia gave me and my magnificent muscles a cold, probing look.

Ugh, what kind of brute couldn't understand the virtue of such a sweet bod? So conceited!

We passed the next few days fighting and laughing and the distance between us seemed to shrink further. One day while we were preparing a delicious breakfast of recently slain monster, Filia called out to me.

"Oh, that reminds me, Yuri?"

"What is it?"

"Why do you live here?"

Ah, that question at last. Filia had probably been wondering for a while now.

Filia continued, still peering at me. "Forests certainly aren't an easy place for humans to live, so I was thinking there had to be some kind of reason. Though, ah, now that I think about it—my apologies if I'm asking something too personal. If it's difficult for you to talk about, you don't have to answer. We can just argue about, oh, I don't know. Muscles, I suppose. But do you mind my question?"

It didn't seem that nosy to me—honestly, she seemed considerate. Although I'd thought of her as smug at first, the past few days had shown an unexpected side to her. She *did* think about others. Yeah, Filia was a good person—no doubt.

"It's not particularly deep. I don't mind talking about it," I replied.

"I'm sorry, Yuri, but all I heard was your thought about just how adorable I was—which is true!—and then I couldn't seem to hear a thing after! Could you please say that again?"

“Yeah, figures.” Good person? Sure. Weirdo? Definitely. I repeated myself. “I’ll tell you. About the reason why I live in this forest, that is. But I gotta warn you, it’s pretty boring.”

I got quiet for a sec as I thought back on all those years ago. “A long time ago,” I said finally, “when I was about five or six years old, I was living alone in the slums somewhere.”

Even that sentence on its own was more concrete than my actual memories. I couldn’t even remember what kind of city I was living in. What I *did* remember was what got me to leave.

“I didn’t have any relatives or friends,” I continued. “One day, a passerby felt sorry for me and gave me this silly picture book. It was something like, ‘The brave hero is aiming to be the greatest wizard of all time but loses in a contest of magic to his rival. After his defeat, he gives up on magic and gets really into cooking, to the point where he becomes a top-class chef. In the end, he finally wins over the rival wizard by becoming the royal cook at the palace.’ Something like that.”

Filia listened to my story in silence.

“Maybe the book was meant to convey the idea that everyone has some natural talent. But after I finished reading it, I just got annoyed. I mean, he lost a magic fight and ran away to cook? Come on.”

It was so unconvincing. Even now, years later, it got a little under my skin.

“If you lose a contest of magic, then you gotta win with magic. That’s clear as day, right? And if you lose at cooking, then you rematch in cooking. If you lose in smarts, then you go at it again until you outsmart ’em. If you don’t get revenge and make a comeback in the same kind of contest, then you didn’t really beat anybody, did you?”

Good for the cook for finding happiness, I guess, but to me the message of that book sounded a lot like “If you lose at something, give it up.” What kinda message was that for children’s literature? If you do happen to lose at something, then you should work hard until you win. That’s all there was to it.

Filia giggled. “Well, I suppose on that point, I don’t dislike this about you, Yuri.”

On *that* point? What was that supposed to mean? Well, whatever.

“That ending just didn’t sit right with me. It got me all pumped

up! In the end, I decided to become the strongest there ever was, never giving up, always getting better one challenge at a time! So I set out on my own journey and rushed out of town to search for the best environment to train!”

“S-such incredible initiative,” said Filia. “And you were *six* years old? Alone?”

“I’m not saying it was easy. There were a bunch of times I came close to death, but you know how we are as kids. Dumb, naughty little rascals.”

“Not exactly what I was getting at,” said Filia, smiling wryly, her cheeks twitching.

“Sure. Anyway. Several weeks, still a kid, running around defeating monsters here and there, as you do. Finally I got to this forest, and,” I gestured vaguely around.

“I see, I understand clearly now. Can I say just one thing?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“That was absolutely, positively *not* a normal, mundane kind of story.”

I blinked. Come on, she had to be pulling my leg...right? “C’mon, it’s perfectly natural. Read a bad picture book, get pumped, go to the forest. Bulk up, beat up monsters.”

“Absolutely, positively, literally no one ever does that except for you, Yuri.”

“Huh. Is that really the way it is? Because it’s...it’s the *forest*, then, eh? Everybody else does it in the hills or by the sea.”

“It’s not a matter of *place*, it’s—Yuri, are you all right?” Quickly Filia came forward and got in close, face-to-face. “In the first place,” she said softly, “a child can’t go on a training journey alone.”

“Seriously?” I asked. It was so hard to believe.

As Filia stared at me—and I could feel my totally buff face pulling into an expression of shock—she looked so exasperated. “But I suppose you, Yuri, spent over ten years in this forest alone. After all that time, it might seem like common sense to you that your life was a typical one.”

I mulled all this over as we finished our meal preparation and ate beside a river. As we’d traveled through the woods over the past few

days, the scenery hadn't changed much. Plants and birds and rocks and things stretched on. The weird conversation did too.

"What do you mean 'common sense'?! " I asked, confounded. "If someone just dropped into the woods and told me their common sense would protect 'em, I'd tell them that common sense can go jump in a lake! Better to study proper with a good book."

"Ugh, I'm getting secondhand anxiety just thinking about it," said Filia.

I gave Filia a thumbs up, but it didn't seem to change her sour expression. I clearly needed to explain myself further.

"Really think about it, Filia. When it comes to books, they're meant to suplex common sense, to roundhouse-kick ignorance. If sense was common, why would we have books to set us all straight? No, I don't buy common sense at all. Not for a second!"

"I-I see," said Filia. "I suppose you might have a point," she added with a quick, more certain nod.

That proved it—my thinking wasn't wrong after all! The knowledge I'd obtained from reading books couldn't be wrong since *this* here muscley bookworm was about to prove the worth of his education by leaving the forest and heading back into the city.

"Glad we're on the same page. So, that's why I always carry a handkerchief with me, and if lightning strikes and causes a fire, I run to the fire," I said, feeling relieved and tucking in to our meal.

"Okay, I was with you on the first half, I'm not going to lie, but what in the world are you talking about with the second part? Why would you do that?" She looked so doubtful. What had I said?

"Well, you've gotta pay respect to nature and natural phenomena. Best way to do that? Get hit by lightning directly. Just feel that sweet, sweet nature nibbling at your muscles, channeling through your rock-hard pecs. Good stuff. Highly recommended."

"I wouldn't...go recommending that to most people. By the way, that book in your story—do you have it?"

"No point. I'd already memorized it, so I left it at home."

"Aww. I guess that once you know you can't read something, you just want to read it immediately. It's just like how the scarier something is, the more you need to see it."

Was that common sense too? Maybe we had different definitions of the term. Probably nothing to worry about, but something to keep in mind.

“All things considered,” said Filia, finishing up her meal, “I have to say we really are lucky the river is flowing so wonderfully right now!”

Yeah, you know, it was pretty reasonable to be overjoyed for water. Hydration is essential for survival. Filia could make drinking water with her water magic, but the taste of natural flowing water was just on a completely different level from man-made water.

“Probably not luck. I’d say it’s my muscles resonating with the muscles of the water flowing here.”

“Muscles of the water...the mystical power of words is truly mighty. I just can’t understand it, even when I use all of my brain power,” said Filia, holding her head.

Did she have a headache? Worrisome.

“Of course, there aren’t any muscles in water in the first place... are there?” she murmured.

Yikes. Misguided at best, there, Filia. I shook my head. “Ah, good grief. Guess I gotta give you a lesson here.”

Now was the time to repay my debt to her. She was letting me accompany her, so I had to tell her something really important. I guided the baffled Filia over to the river and we stopped on the riverbank. There, I began my lesson.

“Listen up, Filia. Water is also in muscles. In fact, about three-quarters of muscle is made up of water,” I told her.

“Well, yeah, I suppose you’re right.”

After getting her agreement, I went and touched the surface of the water. My hand instantly became wet. I showed my palm to Filia.

“And of course, water itself is just made up of water. You with me so far?” I asked.

“Yes?”

Good. Then there was one last thing to understand.

“Muscles and water are more or less just made up of water,” I said. “In other words, water is muscle. You get it, Filia?”

“Ha ha ha! Okay, it’s a logic joke. I get it. Very funny, Yuri!” She laughed so contentedly, but it wasn’t a joke at all.

“Well,” I said with a sigh, “you’re still pretty young, Filia. I’m sure you’ll come to understand it someday.”

“Don’t be creepy.”

But I hadn’t said anything remotely creepy! What a boggling person she was.

“Water muscles aside,” said Filia, “the river looks like it’s going pretty fast, doesn’t it? Also, it looks like there’s a steep drop over there. I’d really prefer to not get too close, if at all possible.”

I turned to face the same direction. After the drop, the river, forest, and land broke rather unnaturally. The constant roar of a thundering waterfall echoed just out of sight. Had to be a steep drop, just as Filia had said. The forest extended far, far below and beyond us, teeming with creatures known and secret. A strange feeling, that.

Also, although the river came up to my waist, my feet should have been touching the river bottom. Instead, I felt like I was floating.

“Yuri, you’re awfully calm. You’re not worried about the waterfall?” asked Filia, her voice trembling slightly.

The waterfall...heh. Now there was a good idea.

“Hey, hey, Filia! How about we jump off the waterfall there, just up ahead? How about it?”

“How about it?” Uh, no? It’s a *waterfall*? Why are you looking at me with those puppy-dog eyes?!”

“A fight with nature... Just listen to the sound of that thing!” I cupped my hand over my ear. “Hear that rush? Them’s fightin’ words!”

Come on, it’d be ridiculously crazy fun! I was grinning just at the thought of it.

Filia was...not.

“If you’re going to dive down a waterfall, you can do it on your own. I absolutely loathe that sort of pointless risk-taking!”

Huffing, Filia started walking up out of the river and away from the waterfall...and slid down on the muddy banks, right back into the rushing water.

“Eeek!”

Filia sank, rose, bobbing helplessly. She hurtled downstream and ripped past me toward the waterfall. My heart swelled with respect for my traveling companion.

“Yeah, Filia! That’s the spirit!”

I never imagined she’d deliberately head up the river and climb upstream for a real running start! And here I’d thought it was an accident! Time to follow her example, take the initiative, and summon my courage!

“N-no, that’s not what I meant to do! Ugh, Yuri, what are you even—”

“All right, let’s do this together as waterfall bros! I’m coming, Filia!”

“I cannot even believe this is haaaaaaAAAAAAPPENING!”

I rushed in and grabbed onto Filia, stopping her from getting swept away. True waterfall bros gotta fall together. I darted downstream, holding Filia tight, and—

“I’m scared, I’m scared, I’m scared, I’m scared, we’re gonna fall, we’re gonna fall, we’re gonna fall, we’re gonna fall... hyaaaaAAAAHHH!”

“WHOOOOOOOOOO! LET’S GOOOOOO!”

We shot over the waterfall arm in arm. For a second we seemed to float dead in the air...then the surface of the water below rushed up at us. The gust of wind on my cheeks, the roar of the falls—what a ride! Nature is awesome!

“This is fun, huh, Filia?!”

I called out to Filia, but she was clinging to me, curled up into a ball. Aw, and here I wanted to share a fun experience. What a shame. Then as we hurtled down the falls, something unfamiliar came into view.

It was a gray-colored man-made structure, like a tall wall. Oh, it was a *castle* wall! Like they might have at a town! Good news all around!

“Hey, Filia! I finally see a clue that’ll lead out of the forest!”

“Yeeeeaaaaaaaghhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaa—”

Filia was clearly over the moon with happiness, to the point that if you didn't know better you might think her eyes were completely blank and she was in a state of shock or something. But hey, that's waterfall diving for ya! As I cackled with glee, our bodies were sucked into the basin under the waterfall.

Chapter 2:

Muscle Magic is Amazingly Strong

“**A**LL RIGHT, looks good.”

We had rolled our clothes out over the small mossy cobblestones at the base of the waterfall just to make sure they were completely dry. Now we were ready to head off again, as while tumbling we'd happened to see a way out of the forest. While we got dressed, I heard Filia's familiar sigh—which somehow cut through the intense pulsating of the waterfall behind us.

“I *really* thought I was going to die. If I hadn't so cleverly—though unconsciously!—used wind magic just before we hit the water's surface...things could have turned out quite dire.”

It was just as Filia said: she'd reduced the impact of our landing on the water's surface with a skillful application of magic, even though she'd apparently been halfway to

passing out. Thanks to those incredible techniques of hers, we clambered out of the basin without a single scratch, and yet...

“Welp, guess that wasn't quite enough thrills for me. Fall again?” I asked, giving the cliff a friendly smack. Didn't seem right or satisfying to have such a chill landing, ya know?

It wouldn't be hard to climb the sheer cliff again—a breeze, in fact! Besides, I could carry Filia on my back. From there, the waterfall bros could fly again.

“I absolutely, positively, definitively do *not* want to do that! And anyway,” she added, shaking her head sharply, “our clothes just dried. That would be terribly inconvenient.”

Hmm... Well, she had a point there. Before Filia lit a fire with her magic, her clothes had been sopping wet, so I hadn't even been able to look at her until just then. But now Filia's clothes seemed to be dry. More or less...

As my eyes tracked down, Filia broke into a grin. “Ooooh, Yuri, you perv! Not that I don't understand your interest, what with my otherworldly cuteness. You're utterly captivated, hmm?”

“Okay, if we’re not climbing back up the cliff, I think it’s about time we head out. How about we get going?”

“Excuse me, are you really going to ignore me?”

No matter how I reacted, she would tease me. Reacting at all, then, was a loss. Filia looked at me, taken aback, as I walked past her over to the path.

Something else was on my mind, honestly. It’d been over a decade since I came to the forest, huh? Weird. Any memory I had of my life before the forest was all faded and blurred now, too. I was leaving my home for a vast world teeming with possibilities and weirdness.

Hell yeah.

“Wow, the scenery sure looks different,” I said.

Within minutes of leaving the basin of the waterfall, the terrain changed from mossy stones to short grass, and the air brushing against our skin went from humid and damp to light and refreshing.

“Whoa, we really did get out of the forest!” I added.

Filia responded with a long, relaxed, “Yeah!”

And why not? The green earth stretched on farther than the horizon, and there was a kinda “we made it” feeling to the air itself. Yeah!

“Don’t get me wrong, Yuri, I *do* love the forest—of course I do—but don’t you just feel more secure with a wide-open view? No real chance of a monster surprise attack! Just green and green and green!”

“Huh. Guess so! Hey, sorry to ask Filia, but can I have some water?”

Now that we were out of the trees, I was feeling thirsty, maybe because of the exhilaration. I wish I’d taken a drink back at the basin, but my mind had been elsewhere. Filia didn’t look at all displeased or reluctant, and she poured some water into my hands. I cupped them and sipped.

“Thanks.”

“Oh no, it’s nothing.”

The cold water trickled down my throat. It felt as though as I was being completely healed from the core of my body.

“Ohhh, come *on*! Even though magic can’t touch you, you can drink water produced *through* magic? All right, now that’s just unfair. We can both agree that it’s unfair, can’t we?” Filia folded her arms.

“You think so? Well, it’s not like my body is invincible or anything.”

Sure, magic rarely if ever made an impact on me, but that didn’t necessarily mean I could like, disable it wholesale or anything. Like all magnificently massive muscles, mine could only withstand so much. If I were to take on arcane whatnot more powerful than my potent pecs, I’d no doubt be preternaturally punished. Not that I’d ever suffered any such damage before. Not thus far. I had faith in these muscles!

“What are we going to do now?” I said, after a silence. “Are we splitting up? Or traveling together?”

“You know, I’ve been wondering that for a few days now. If I’m not imposing, could I accompany you a little while longer, Yuri? The road is long. I would hate to be bored,” said Filia. “Besides, Yuri, you’re funny.”

And here I was thinking *she* was the funny one.

“Furthermore, we elves are rather...*insular*. That is to say, we don’t often leave the forest. My people are *quite* beautiful, as I’m sure you’re aware, and that means we are *highly* valued by slave traders. Obviously, I could more than manage such a threat if necessary, but a little more protection never hurts. And I would... I’d like that. The protection, I mean,” said Filia, blushing a little and squirming.

“What’s in it for me?” I asked.

“What’s in it—why, you’d be traveling together with a cutie like me,” Filia replied, placing a finger on her soft cheek, as if my very question must’ve been a joke.

“And that’s a benefit?”

“Of course it is, no matter how you look at it! Besides, I wouldn’t feel any heartache or guilt or anything for using others to get cute little me to safety!” declared Filia, brimming with energy. She must’ve had hidden secret reserves of smugness because she could always turn it up

another notch farther than I thought possible.

“Did you really, actually, in reality just say that right in front of me?”

Seriously, what? She *seemed* intelligent, but was she really an airhead? Well, I guess being around an airhead would be more bearable than hanging out with a certain kind of egghead. And she was pretty good in a fight, too.

“Ah, also, with my Telepathy I can see you don’t have a hidden side, Yuri. You’re the kind of person who just says whatever they think, just like yours truly. I do think you’re a pervert, but you’re *tolerably* perverted. At any rate, I’d say that *I’m* in the position of asking *you* for things.”

Before I knew it, she was talking as if the matter of her accompanying me was a done deal. Maybe she did speak her mind a little too much? I let out a deep sigh.

Well, I supposed Filia *was* the reason I’d left the forest at all. I probably couldn’t just refuse her request out of hand.

“Do whatever you want,” I said.

“It just so happens that what I want is to accompany you! A satisfying conclusion, he he.”

“Ah.” I stopped moving.

Filia stopped behind me. “What’s the matter?”

“Filia, do you know where the town is? I know I saw it when we were falling down the waterfall, but I don’t remember *where* I saw it.”

“A town? That you saw? At that speed, at that time of day, falling from the top of a waterfall?”

“Yes?”

“But you can’t tell me where?”

“No.”

“Th-that’s amazing! Unfortunately, I wasn’t really paying attention when I got lost in the woods, so I don’t even know where we were in the first place. And I had my eyes closed when we were tumbling down the waterfall. All I know is that humans are said to be the most prosperous people in the world.”

“Seriously? What’s that have to do with it? Jeez, you really don’t know a thing.”

“All right, Mr. Human, what about *you*? Shouldn’t you know the exact location of the town?” responded Filia, throwing my question back in my face.

Hmph. How foolish. I answered her with a full, broad smile. “Do you really think someone like me, secluded in the forest ever since childhood, would know something like that?”

Filia gave me a curious squint. “Do you need to sound so...*proud* of that?”

I guess she had a point. Ignoring Filia, who was still looking at me with narrowed eyes, I peered around for any clues that might tell us where the town was.

“Oh wow, we sure have good luck. We don’t gotta worry anymore,” I said.

“What do you mean?” She tilted her head, confused.

I extended my arm and pointed into the distance. “There it is, the castle wall from earlier. The one I saw when we were dropping off the waterfall.” *Real* lucky that I could see it from here, too.

“A...castle...wall?” replied Filia, furrowing her brow. Apparently Filia couldn’t see it. “Yuri, you really have good eyesight, don’t you?”

“Well, I’ve trained them.”

“You trained your...” She rubbed her temples. “Sorry, you trained your eyes? What does that even...?”

In any case, we started for the castle wall. It was a long walk, though, and soon enough my companion was noticeably bored.

“Yuri, do you have any hobbies?” she asked.

Hobbies? Well, the number of things I could do were pretty limited in the forest. Let’s see, what *did* I do for fun? Oh, right!

“Heh, I just *love* training my body. Muscle training, stuff like that.”

It hadn’t occurred to me right off the bat because it was less a hobby and more a lifestyle, but I just adored training. Inside the forest, where visibility was poor, there was always a danger of being hit with a surprise attack from behind. If you didn’t train constantly and got

caught unawares, you'd be on the slippery-slide to the afterlife with a crushed skull and no embarrassing story to tell on account of being dead and all.

That was why I made sure to train everything I could possibly train. Eyes, nose, ears, muscles—the whole chiseled enchilada.

“Come to think of it,” said Filia, “even when we were in the forest, you were pretty much constantly talking about muscles and stuff. Like how because you've trained, magic is ineffective against you, and other weird stuff like that. Hmm, but...” she stared at my body a little rudely, doubt creeping into her voice, “I can't really see much muscle on you.”

It was certainly true that my body didn't appear muscular. While I did look more robust than say, Filia, I probably came off like a normal man, if with a little extra girth.

“It's because I'm intentionally keeping myself in this form. When I'm in a proper fight, it's different, you know?” I replied, and let my body *surge* with might.

In the blink of an eye, my body morphed into the correct form for a *serious* fight. My muscles swelled and bulged, tearing my jacket in seconds, and in an instant I was halfway to buck naked. One head taller, too—just over six feet in total.

“What do you think? Amazing, huh?”

Just as I expected, Filia's silver eyes went wide.

“No, nonononono, this is too much. You even got taller! You completely turned into some kind of inhuman...master of muscle!” Filia wailed.

“Come on, don't praise me like that, you're makin' me all bashful.”

“I'm not praising you!”

I didn't normally bother to transform. Getting all bulky hindered my movement and put stealth out of the question. There was nothing better than training your muscles, but bigger isn't always better. It all depends on the situation, and sometimes having an average body is more appropriate to your needs. That was why I put a limiter on when I wasn't fighting, to restrain my borderline-divine muscles. After Filia's shower of compliments, I reverted back to my average-body form and

shrugged on a spare jacket.

“Besides, even in this state I’ve still got a fair amount of power.”

I picked up a small, reasonably sized stone on the ground and squeezed it. When I opened my hand it was a pile of sand.

“Look.”

“Are...small stones something that can just be pulverized like that?”

“Depends. Do you lift?”

“I think I, um, know enough about this for now,” Filia said, whatever she meant by that. She seemed bowled over.

“Let’s see...also, I can shoot out fire.”

“You can use fire magic? So, that means that you *are* a magician, right, Yuri?”

“I certainly am. But my fire isn’t from fire magic, it’s muscle magic.”

I flexed my arm for emphasis. Filia looked at me with a blank expression.

“*Muscle* magic?”

“You know, magic that can only be used by training your muscles.”

I punched the air in front of me. My fist cut through the air fast enough to break the speed of sound and a sudden fiery boom cracked through the silence.

“See?”

“But...but I didn’t detect any trace of magical energy whatsoever. What *was* that?”

“Simple: I punched through the air with sufficient speed. Went so fast my fist caught fire.”

“Your fist caught—could you repeat that last bit?”

“I punched through the air with sufficient speed. Went so fast my fist caught fire.”

“Hhuhhh?! Um? Wh-what do you mean?”

It seemed Filia was perplexed by my novel type of magic. Not too

surprising, considering I was pretty sure it was fairly unique. It was even possible magic like mine didn't exist outside of the forest.

"Muscle magic doesn't use magical energy, ya see."

"Then it isn't proper *magic*, is it? It would qualify more as a, um, a feat of strength," said Filia, still looking stunned. I didn't quite get what she was trying to say. You just can't explain some things to people who don't work out, you know?

"Hey, Yuri. This may be a little touchy, but, ah... You wouldn't happen to be a monster or something, would you?"

"Wha—that's just mean! I'm a human!" A monster! Come on, really? Me, your average dime-a-dozen hardworking joe! Man, what a weird girl!

Our banter took us the rest of the way down the road such that by evening, around sunset, Filia and I arrived safe and sound at the castle wall. Looked way taller than a person, I'll tell you. Taller than my cottage too—like four or five of my cottages stacked on top of each other.

"Wow. You ever seen anything like this before, Filia?"

"Not at all! It's amazing! We elves coexist with nature, so we don't build anything like this."

A few folks wearing leather armor hung around in front of the gate, but they let us through without any problems. But then, why were those guys standing there in the first place?

The conclusion hit me right quick: they were meant to keep monsters from getting into the town or something. We'd encountered a few critters between leaving the forest and getting to civilization, so there had to be *some* kind of danger. (Needless to say, we'd thrashed every beastie we met on the way.)

More importantly: the town! Once inside, we were met with rows and rows of wooden buildings lining dozens upon dozens of paved streets. I could hardly take them in one at a time, let alone all at once—it was my first time seeing a real township, so naturally my excitement was through the roof!

"All right, all right, *all right*! What are we going to do now, Filia?!"

"Hmm, yes, what *should* we do, Yuri? For the time being, I propose we find lodging at an inn. Agreed?"

I clapped my hands with a satisfying, thunderous slap. “An inn, huh? Ha! I wouldn’t have thought of that at all! You’re really something!”

“And you really aren’t all there, are you?”

“You think? Well, okay, if the inn doesn’t work out—worst-case scenario and all—we can just sleep on the street, probably. Nothing to worry about there. We’re bona fide monster hunters; nobody’s gonna mess with us and get away with it.”

“That sounds awfully barbaric, Yuri...”

Once we got to the inn, I realized I didn’t have any money to pay for a room, so I had to ask Filia to spot me. Sure, she told me not to worry about it, but it seemed pretty unmanly to make a lady pay. Also, we now had to think of ways to earn more money before we could even think of doing anything else. I started mulling our next step as we went up to our room.

Once there, Filia and I sat back, relaxed, and let our hair down. The room came with what I understood were your usual accommodations for an inn, except...there was just one bed.

“Hey, Filia? Did you get us a single?”

“All right, all right! Maybe I did, but we don’t have a choice. Not unless your muscle magic can summon up a little extra cash for a double!”

Looked like our financial affairs were in worse shape than I’d thought. Maybe it was because we were in a closed room by ourselves, just the two of us, but Filia’s expression seemed to stiffen somewhat. These are the times that a man’s gotta be a *real* man.

“You take the bed,” I told her. She was the one who’d paid for it, after all, and a man’s gotta recognize that.

“Urging me to use the bed...” Filia covered her mouth. “*Aha!* I know your game! You want me on the bed so you can go after my enticing, nubile body! You foul knave!” Filia huffed, crossing her arms in front of her unjiggly breasts for emphasis.

I blinked. “What are you talking about? I’m just saying that since I can sleep standing up, I don’t need the bed. As long as I get an hour in, I’ll be good.”

“You only need one hour of sleep? How bizarre. I suppose I saw

you sleeping like that in the forest, but I didn't realize you just...*did* that all the time."

"Besides, you're the one who paid for the room, Filia. It's only natural that you get the most use from it, don't you think?"

"Ha! Mister Muscles is more gentlemanly than he appears, hmm? Just the two of us... Just the two of us here in a lonely room in a faraway inn, a friendly hulk and a *most* elegant and beautiful lady, and you're going to be sleeping standing up."

"Beautiful lady? Where?" I jerked my neck up and made a big show of looking around.

Filia hopped in front of me, trying to get into my field of vision, but gave up pretty quick. "Hmph!" She puffed out her cheeks. "You have *angered* this elegant lady. Good night!"

"Sure, g'night."

And with that, our very first night in the city came to an end.

I rolled over on the bed my muscley companion had so kindly provided for me. Why couldn't I sleep? I *should* have been able to fall asleep right away if I really wanted to go to bed, yes? Here I was in my most comfortable pajamas and everything, and it just wasn't working. I contemplated my plight for a moment before arriving at the answer—yes, that had to be it. There was just something so curious about this level of...comfort.

I had been able to read minds for a long time. Over those years, I noticed something—everyone wears a mask in order to survive. In other words, people lie. They have their motives, of course: to protect themselves, to hurt other people. All kinds of reasons.

There were two things about Telepathy that weighed on me. One was that I could pick up every little prevarication, well-intentioned or not. Far from pleasant. The second was that my mind wasn't strong enough to stop everything I knew, everything I could *read*, from wearing down my heart. Come now, do you think someone in a fine state of mental health would wander into an unfamiliar forest without thinking and get so dangerously lost? No. It all *weighs*.

And yet in that unfamiliar forest, I'd met Yuri. Quite frankly, I was on my guard when we first crossed paths. How odd to find a human living so deep in the forest. But now, several days later, things were different. When he lied, it was a clear lie—a joke and nothing more. He didn't lie to put on appearances, or to hurt people.

He spoke his mind according to his heart. That was who he was. Perhaps Yuri *would* lie if he could, but I couldn't imagine the awkward lug getting away with it. It was incredibly refreshing. Novel, even. And it was...nice.

I looked over to Yuri.

He stood a little ways away, his back to me. The man was probably training even now. He said it was his hobby, and indeed, there he was in the middle of the night doing quiet little exercises to avoid disturbing my sleep, which was a bit funny. Maybe it shouldn't have been funny, but this level of conscientiousness didn't suit my odd new partner at all.

Watching him, my lingering confusion and meandering thoughts melted into other things. Safety. Relief. When had I come to trust this person?

Honestly, he was a touch...oh, I don't know. Yes, he was strange, but when I saw him looking at me, I knew he didn't see me as some elf with an abundance of magical power, nor as a mind-reading freak. He was looking at me and seeing *me*. Filia Windia.

It was nice.

“Eh he he he.”

I felt the grin on my face and quickly buried it in my soft pillow.

She was finally asleep, huh?

I noticed a change in Filia's breathing behind me and turned around. Filia had fallen asleep with an expression that was, to be honest, happier than I'd ever seen her wear. It was...I guess “unguarded” is the word? She breathed kinda loudly, with her mouth hanging open a little sloppily as she slept. The prim and proper Filia

she'd been since we'd met was just gone.

“Wow. I guess she really trusts me that much, huh?”

Something about saying it out loud made it real, and a bit embarrassing. The embarrassment passed pretty quick, though, and then I felt even happier than I had before.

“All right. Okay. Back to my special training.”

Back to the grind, making little flicks with my fingers into the open air, quietly breaking the speed of sound.

Chapter 3:

Rough and Tumble Rogues Gather in the Guild

ONCE FILIA WOKE UP the next morning, we wandered the town as we figured out what to do about the money situation. My heart was still pounding against my rib cage; every new piece of scenery left me feverish with excitement. After eavesdropping on some passersby, we gathered that the best way to earn money for new folks like us was to head over to the local guild and become adventurers.

Apparently they even bought raw materials from slain monsters!

“Yuri, it seems like everybody calls this place ‘the Town of Beginnings,’ or Astarte.”

“The Town of Beginnings?”

“Right. They say that the hero, the demon king, and the dark god were all born around here, hence the Town of Beginnings.”

“Heh, sweet!”

As we walked, though, we started to realize we looked a bit out of place.

“Hey, Filia, do we kinda stand out here?”

“It does seem so.”

As people passed by, their gazes were inevitably drawn to us...or no, they were drawn to Filia. As they stared, I stared right back, which was when I started to notice something: human, dog beastman, human, human, cat beastman, human, human, human, bear beastman...Not a single elf, no matter how hard I looked.

It seemed elves really were rare after all. I knew Filia had said elves were an insular people who rarely left their forest, but it was another thing to see the total absence of anyone who looked like her. She would’ve gotten a lot of attention just for being pretty beyond compare, but when you added in how uncommon it was to see an elf? It was only natural she had everyone’s interest.

Wow. Now that I thought about it, Filia—despite being younger than me and traveling alone—was a pretty amazing person, huh? I

looked over at her as she walked beside me, gazing with awe at our surroundings. Her silver eyes glowed with curiosity, and I could only imagine how new the town looked to her as well.

Powerful, capable, and drop-dead gorgeous. If she ever wanted to replace me with a new ally, she really could have her pick of the litter.

Guess I'd just deal with that when the time came—oh, whoops.

Filia had noticed me staring at her, probably because I'd been looking a little too long. Her gaze, luminous as pearls, fell upon me.

"Aww, what's the matter? Did you fall in love with me, by any chance?" said Filia. She put her finger to her cheek and tilted her head to the side, mooning at me with upturned eyes. The ultimate cunning move, only accessible by cute girls. None could stand before it.

"I take it back," I mumbled.

"Ah, please wait!"

I scrambled toward the guild to hide my fluster.

"So, is this the guild?" I asked a little too loudly.

"It appears to be. And it looks quite old, too."

Just as Filia said, the building had clearly seen better days, unlike the surrounding structures. The wood was tinged dark after years of open-air exposure; the history of the organization was embedded in the wood-grain.

However, when Filia and I stepped inside the guild, we found it trim, tidy, and basically normal. I'd kinda selfishly imagined it would be a dim, gloomy place, but nope.

Just like the people outside, the people inside immediately zeroed in on Filia:

"Hey, hey, check it out!"

"Whoa, who's she? She's super cute!"

"Is she that guy's companion? He looks a little puny for her, ha!"

"Whoa, check this elf! She looks just like they say!"

Tidy as it was, it seemed like the guild was still a place where rough-and-tumble ruffians gathered. Not very discerning ruffians, though. Puny? Couldn't they see my highly toned, well-trained muscles?

Hmph. I'd have to show them, I guess.

Thus, I tore off my clothes for a proper demonstration. Then—hoping it wouldn't be too much sheer power for the crowd—I expanded my muscles, transforming into a figure so strikingly beautiful that no doubt the floor would soon be slathered in drool as the ruffians' mouths hung open in awe and desire.

Sure enough, the adventurers who were witness to my massive, exquisitely honed muscles made a real commotion.

“Whoa. What's with that guy? Why did he train his body like that?”

“No idea. Maybe he's some kinda extreme masochist or something. I don't want him to come near me.”

“Wait, actually, why'd he just suddenly start taking his clothes off?”

“Maybe he's an exhibitionist?”

“You know, those two kinda look like an angel and a gorilla.”

“Ha ha! You ain't wrong!”

Weird. Were these guys trying to talk smack about my muscles? Seemed a little backwards for a bunch of stick-thin twigs to look down on such a sweet, sweet, basically divine bod. Ugh, what an absurd world. Completely unfair!

Filia patted me on the shoulder. I turned to face her and she wore a wide grin. She pointed at herself. “Angel.” Then she pointed at me, still smiling. “Goooo-rilla! Pfft. Eh he he. Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Oh, that's soooo funny, Filia. Made me wanna wipe that smile off her face, but...then again, elves were more or less ignorant of the common manners of the human world, weren't they? So there was no helping her on that front. And heck, perhaps in the elvish world, being called a gorilla was a compliment.

Sure, there we go!

Though for some reason, Filia was *also* rolling on the ground, clutching her belly as she howled with laughter...but perhaps in the elvish world that kind of action was also a compliment?

Sure, why not.

“Gorilla! He called you a gorilla! Aaahh ha ha ha he he he he hehehhhh!”

“All right, enough already. Let’s hurry up and head over to the receptionist.”

“Ah, wait...five more minutes, please. Gotta get this out. Pfff—ha! Heee haw!”

“Like hell I’m waiting! Come on, let’s go!”

I stalked over to the receptionist counter in the guild, dragging Filia behind me.

“Excuse me, we’d like to register as adventurers.”

The second I said that to the girl sitting at the receptionist desk, she explained the sitch in the flattest, most rehearsed tone I’d ever heard.

According to her, the guild had been established in order to repel the threat of monsters, and it was a nationwide organization that extended across the country. Adventurers were divided into ranks, starting from novices at Rank E all the way to masters at Rank S, and the kinds of requests you could take were limited by your rank. Basically you could only take requests that corresponded with your current level.

All well and good, but what *really* mattered was that when you rose up to a higher rank, you could enter areas normal people weren’t allowed to. For somebody who wanted to see the whole world—someone like me—it was critical to shoot for S-Rank!

“That’s all there is to explain. Would you like me to repeat? Yes or no.”

“Ye—I mean, no.”

“Excellent. Please write your names here on these papers.” She handed us two white slips of paper, each about the size of my palm. “Would you like me to write your name on your behalf?”

“Ah, no, that’s all right, I got it.”

“I’m fine as well.”

Welp, now it was time to write my name. Just how long had it been since I last wrote anything? With painstaking slowness, I signed the paper. When I casually glanced over to my side, I saw Filia arching her neck to peek at my writing.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing, really.”

When I took a quick peep over at what Filia wrote, I saw she had utterly elegant penmanship. What wasn't she good at? Personality aside, she really was a flawless superhuman.

After we handed the papers back to the receptionist, we each received guild cards. They were palm-sized cards, each printed with our name and the letter E. The receptionist added that it could be used as a form of identification.

“Marvelous. Now, Yuri, how about we sell these monster materials?”

“Sounds good.”

Filia opened the cloth bag she kept at her waist and methodically extracted horns, tentacles, hooves, tails, wings, claws, and so forth, all of which we'd harvested from the monsters we had defeated while we were making our way through the forest to the town. One after the other, she put our spoils on the counter. There really were a lot—more than you would've thought could fit in that tiny bag. It was bigger on the inside, apparently, a “bag of holding” as Filia called it.

With each new material Filia presented, the receptionist went more and more rigid.

“Wha...? Where did you obtain all of these?”

I shrugged. “Where”? The forest.”

In the end, our materials sold for a way higher price than I'd thought they would. According to the receptionist, my home forest was known as the “Forest of Death,” and it was considered suitable adventuring fare for guild members of Rank B and up.

“I see, so you defeated monsters from the Forest of Death so easily, then that means... My goodness, you two are both *very* promising newcomers. I eagerly await news of your future exploits,” said the receptionist, bowing her head to us.

Our business finished and payday acquired, we left the counter and headed over to the board where people pinned their requests.

“Did you hear that, Yuri? She said we're promising newcomers!”

“I was there, so yeah, I heard her.”

Filia was definitely in high spirits, perhaps because she'd been

praised. Sometimes she seemed a little too, uh, easy to please.

“Since that Forest of Death is supposed to be for B-Rank adventurers, E-Rank requests should be a breeze for us, right?” she said.

“You might be right about that, but you shouldn’t let your guard down. I mean, I know of an elf who overestimated herself and got lost in the middle of that very forest. You familiar with the story?”

Filia turned her most childish pout on me. “Th-that has nothing to do with this, though! And I shall *not* be criticized by someone with such crude handwriting!”

“Weird flex, but okay.” It was the first time anyone had called my handwriting *crude*. “You really do try every angle when it comes to insults, you know.”

“He he he.”

“You realize that wasn’t a compliment, right?” Why did she seem a little embarrassed? Well, whatever. “All right. Let’s try one out and get used to the system. After we take a request once—”

“Yo, sweetie, you gotta pretty cute face there, huh?”

Suddenly, someone called out to Filia in a rather audacious tone. When we turned to where it was coming from, we found a few young men who looked to be around twenty years old. They slowly started approaching Filia, smirking, licking their lips.

What was up with their lanky, frail bodies, though? That was the first thing that ran through my mind, anyway. They had decent-looking faces and all, but their bodies were so thin and delicate. So many twigs in this town! Maybe they were magicians? Even still, I was of the opinion that every adventurer should be required to have a bare minimum amount of muscle—enough to at least dodge an attack or get in some basic self-defense.

“Do you lot need something?” Filia snapped.

“Oh noooooo, I just think you’re really pretty is all, sweetie. Don’t you think it’d be way more fun being with us rather than that uggo?”

The men drew in closer, still smirking. Filia had stood out the instant we set foot inside the guild, so I guess it made sense that a group like this would make a move on her.

“Oh, what an interesting and original proposition. I think I’ll...

pass,” said Filia, examining her nails as if she were afraid a piece of the group was stuck under them.

“Huh? What’d you just say, sweetie?”

“Do you think that makes you sound fun? You don’t seem very entertaining. And, for your information, I’m not *five*. So cut it out with the ‘sweetie’ business before I retch.” With that, she stuck her tongue out at them and made a hideous “blargh” noise.

You’d think all that would anger these schmucks, but instead they looked kind of happy to see Filia’s pink cherry blossom of a tongue. What a hopeless bunch of goons.

“Oh wow, a feisty one, ain’t ya? You know, that’s just our type. Just leave that busted-up dude over there and come play with us.”

Busted-up? Real funny coming from the twig patrol. Even I felt grossed out now, and I could only imagine how irritated my companion was.

Filia furrowed her brow in complete and utter disgust. “I already said no, so could you please go back to whatever miserable little hovels you barely inhabit? Enough is enough. Just look at you all: we’re not exactly suited for one another anyway, looks-wise. Perhaps you could find a nice ferret to woo, or a scorpion”

Ooh, that was pretty harsh. Of course, there weren’t any humans that were a match for Filia looks-wise in the first place, I was sure. But how could these guys not see that she was ticked? How dumb were they? Just hopelessly dense. Maybe it was time for me to put a stop to this.

Then one of them finally said something interesting.

“Come on, don’t be so cold,” he pressed. “We can work something out, don’t you think?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on. Just a minute.” I got between the men and Filia.

“Yuri!”

I held up my hand. I just couldn’t leave this alone without saying something. “Could you let me join you? For the workout, I mean.”

I couldn’t believe these guys were so rude *and* tactless! They were offering to work out? Without me? Clearly I was way more suited to

that kind of thing than Filia.

But when I said that, the men and Filia all gave me strange looks!

“Hey jerkatron, what’d ya just say?”

Filia sighed. “I was a fool to expect anything from you, Yuri.”

What? Was I wrong?

“I’m just disappointed that you’re excluding me,” I said.

“Excuse me, I believe *you’re* the selfish one here, getting all disheartened when people don’t want to do what you want,” said Filia with a huff.

“You...!” Speaking of people who don’t do what you want, the adventurers were starting to seethe. “All right, you, cut the crap! Less joking, more blasting!”

The three of them each started preparing to cast magic, three different kinds, all aimed straight at Filia. Just as I’d suspected, this was going way too far.

Right as they fired off their spells, I threw myself forward, right in the direction of their casting. Simultaneously, their three spells slammed into me and my guard stance. Ugh. Didn’t hurt at all.

I let out a deep, silent sigh of disappointment. Their attacks were way weaker than the monsters that lived in the Forest of Death. Far too weak to be interesting. Oh well.

“Are you okay, Filia?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

Well, yeah, that should’ve been obvious. Since this was Filia we were talking about, she probably would’ve been able to deal with these piddly attacks just fine without me getting in the way, but it was the principle of the thing, ya know?

Meanwhile, the adventurers gave each other nervous looks. “Why aren’t you injured? Your clothes didn’t even get singed! That’s—what the heck?!”

“Eh he he he! It’s because Yuri has been living as a savage, after all,” boasted Filia.

Now that didn’t make any sense to me at all. Why was Filia suddenly so proud of my supposed ‘savagery’?

“D-don’t screw with us!”

The men lost their tempers and hurled another trio of magical attacks. Unfortunately, since they had terrible aim, some of their spells veered off course. I had to dodge around to make sure every attack actually hit me.

“Yuri, what on earth are you doing? Why did you let them hit you?”

“Well, it’d be bad if they messed up the inside of the guild, right?”

Soon enough, three men stood wheezing from exhaustion in the center of the guild, having fired volley after fruitless volley. And then there was me, untouched, uninjured, and maybe just a *little* disappointed.

“You jerkanoid! Are you some kinda m-monster?”

“It’s not me, it’s you,” I scolded them. “You’re all just far too weak. Were you even trying?”

“Grr, getting on your high horse like that!”

They glared at me, but it wasn’t intimidating in the least. Frankly, he seemed scared of me.

“W-we were taking it easy on you! Yeah, that’s right, we were just giving you a greeting right now, so we were holding back!” said one of the men. The other two hastily followed suit and agreed.

These guys... How could I ignore a challenge like that? With a wild grin, I brought myself up to my full height and struck an imposing stance.

“Holding back, you say? How half-hearted! And you call yourselves *men*? More... Come at me with more!”

“What the hell is your deal?! You’re creeping us out!”

Once more, the adventurers gathered magical energy. Aww yeah, here we go! Man against man, toe-to-toe, a magnificent opportunity to train my terrific tolerance of magic!

But just before they let loose their attack, a man in a pristine white soldier-type uniform barged into the guild.

“That’s enough!” he roared. “The use of attack magic is strictly prohibited in town! That’s just common sense!”

Tsk. Guess my magic training would have to wait. Wait...come to think of it, Filia could use her magic on me, couldn't she? Yeah, next time I needed the practice, I could just have her shoot her magic at me!

"Hey, you! Are you listening?" the soldierly man snarled.

Whoops, I guess I was lost in my own little world. When I came back to my senses, I saw the three troublemakers had been arrested by the man in white. Some kind of glowing magic thread had the three of 'em all tied up.

"Hey! Are you listening?!" the man in white repeated.

"Do you need something?" I asked. How annoying!

"I am a knight of the order who protect Astarte. You are aware of the law, I take it? The use of any magical attacks capable of posing harm to others is strictly forbidden within the limits of Astarte."

Had the receptionist said something like that, too? Maybe... It didn't really have anything to do with me in this circumstance, though.

"I understand these fellows dragged you into an altercation, but the law is the law. I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to accompany me."

"Eh? Why, though?"

"They are magicians, and you fought. You used magic to counter them, didn't you?"

"Ohhhh. Nope." These guys had been way too weak for me to bother with muscle magic.

"Nonsense! Then how did you withstand their attacks?"

"Muscles, duh."

"Don't make jokes!"

My muscles were no joking matter. My exquisite muscles could stop swinging blades—of course they were impervious to three twerps with weak magic. Why was this knight guy being so unreasonable?

"I'm taking you with me!"

"Huh?"

Finally, Filia jumped in: "Please, sir, please listen. Yuri really didn't use any magic. He doesn't even have any magical energy to speak of."

Ah, Filia was covering for me! And here I thought she was a little

too coldhearted for that, but—hold on, back up. Had she just said I had no magical energy?

“How do you know that?” the man asked.

“Can’t you see? I’m an elf.”

Was this an elf thing, then, detecting magic? The knight seemed to think so, as he relented, though he didn’t look too happy about it.

And...that was that. Everything was settled! Or so I thought.

“May I ask you one thing?” asked the man, turning to face me.

“Go for it.”

“Would you dare take an attack from me? If you can withstand it unharmed, it would prove your innocence.”

“You’re allowed to use magic, then?” I asked.

“As a knight of the order, indeed.”

“Well then, I guess you should bring it on, eh?”

On hearing my answer, the man nodded and we assumed positions. I took up my guard stance while the man closed his eyes and concentrated. As he did, magical energy emanated from him at a level incomparable to the feeble offerings of the twigs from earlier.

All right, *this* guy had my attention!

His spell took form damn fast, too, at just under three seconds: a molten fireball pulsing in his hand with more power than those three had ever shot at me combined.

“Here it comes,” the man roared.

He unleashed the blazing ball of fire. It hurtled toward me and collided with my guard stance. In an instant the fireball burned my clothes to ashy shreds that wafted to the floor.

“Aw, nice! Pretty great fire, all things told! Looks like it was enough to burn my clothes off, to boot.”



Burning my clothes was nothing to scoff at, though that fireball still hadn't had enough juice to injure me. Still! Not bad!

"Much as I find this difficult to believe," the man said painstakingly, "your companion is telling the truth. I felt not a single spark of magical energy from you. I must apologize for doubting you."

"Oh no, it's fine. I always love a good spot of training!"

Guess I still had a long way to go, if an attack like that could burn my clothes. After the knight apologized once again for any inconvenience, he offered me a change of clothes and left, those three ruffians in tow. The clothes he left were expensive, too—I guess it was a genuine apology. Didn't seem necessary; the whole thing had been a tiny annoyance, if anything.

"Well. I'm glad you didn't get taken away," said Filia.

I nodded. "Yeah. We're still pretty broke, we can't afford to lose a second of time dealing with jail and whatever."

Plus, the sooner we got to work, the sooner I could climb the ranks and explore the world! Then I'd fight powerful enemies, grow stronger, and follow my *ultimate path*!

"You really are some kind of battle-loving idiot, aren't you?" Filia said with a dejected sigh. To my surprised face, she said, "Oh, you didn't need to say a word of that aloud."

That was Telepathy for you, huh?

"Ehh, whatever. Let's take this one here for the time being," I replied. With that, I snatched a paper request from the bulletin board at random and jaunted back over to the reception desk.

Chapter 4:

The Grand Plan to Defeat Monsters While Gathering Medicinal Herbs

AFTER OUR LITTLE KERFUFFLE at the guild, we accepted a request to gather medicinal herbs and headed right back out of Astarte. The woods the request sent us to were almost nothing like the Forest of Death—like sure there were trees and stuff, but the place was geared more toward novice adventurers and filled with only your most boring garden-variety monsters.

Once we found a likely looking hunting ground, we crouched in the greenery and got to rooting around.

“Oh, there you are,” I said, plucking some of the herbs we were after.

Filia raised an eyebrow. “You found them awfully quickly, Yuri. Wasn’t that a little fast?”

“No, no. You just gotta sniff around. The scent always gives me a pretty good idea of where they’re hiding.”

This herb-harvesting quest sure was a cakewalk for me. After all, all those years in the forest I’d had to make do without any potions. Injuries could quickly turn fatal if you didn’t have an alternative source of healing, which for me had been herbs. You’ve just gotta know your medicinal plants if you’re going to be stuck in a deadly monstrous forest for a decade, you know? I mean, hypothetically. I never really got injured while I was there, but I was always ready just in case.

As for why medicinal herbs were ever required in a world with recovery magic, it seemed only a few people could cast those particular spells. You had to pay a high price to get one of them to help you out.

That was what Filia told me the day before back at the inn, anyway, puffing out her nonexistent chest and boasting to the heavens. So now here I was in the forest, digging up herbs and dealing with more of Filia’s confused looks.

“Excuse me,” she said, “but I thought medicinal herbs were flavorless and odorless?”

“*Nothing* smells like ‘nothing.’ Give it another whiff. You don’t think they have a slightly sweet smell?”

Filia sighed and shot me an exasperated look. “And you’re *sure* you’re a human, Yuri? Not even a dog can sniff out these herbs.”

“Well, how many dogs grew up in the Forest of Death? This is the least any forest-dweller could do.”

As my words reached Filia’s ears, they twitched slightly. “Oh *really*? I myself am a resident of the forest, and I refuse to lose to you!” she cried, her eyes burning with fiery pride.

“Wanna make it a contest?”

“You’re on!”

Thus did my Medicinal Herb Gathering Showdown with Filia begin. By evening, our one-on-one plant-grabbing extravaganza was still blazing forward!

Honestly I got more absorbed in our contest than I expected. Filia was quite the worthy opponent. Her speed was a near match for mine, as suited a proper denizen of the trees. Often, she spotted an herb I’d missed with a mere sideways glance.

She claimed this was the kind of skill that came to anyone who lived in the forest for years, but I dunno, that kind of lightning-quick herb identification seemed less like a “forest-living skill” and more like a “super elf skill.” And she had the gall to say *I* wasn’t human!

“Hm! My bag of holding’s nearly full. Perhaps we should call it here?” suggested Filia.

Made sense, so I agreed and we hunkered down to compare our findings.

“Welp, Filia, I have 140. You have 136. Looks like I win.”

By a slim margin, admittedly.

“Mrrrr... If I knew it was going to turn out like this, I would’ve bought a bigger bag back in Astarte! You only won because we happened to stop when you were in the lead. If we’d just had a little longer...” Filia bit her lip in frustration.

Wow, she really hated to lose, huh? Up until that moment, I hadn’t thought of her as the competitive type. She seemed so content to do everything at her own pace. Maybe it was because her pride as an elf

was on the line now?

I shrugged. "Well, since we don't have any more business in this forest, let's head back."

"Waaaaah, waaaa haaaaa haaaaaa!" Filia abruptly burst into tears. Sprawling on the ground, she covered both of her eyes with her dainty hands.

It was a lot to take in, let me tell ya.

"W-waaaah, waaaah! Wah, wah, wahhhhh!" Filia peeked at me through the gap between her fingers.

Suddenly, this indescribable awkwardness settled over us. Was I supposed to say something to her? I'd always lived alone, so...what was the right move here?

While I stood there in silence, Filia opened her mouth. "Yuri, this is the part where you comfort me."

So that *was* what she wanted, to the point where she'd put on a weird, unconvincing tantrum. Filia's childish side had struck again. She took another glance at me through the gap in between her fingers. Okay, "unconvincing" might've been too much of a compliment for this performance.

"Well, to be perfectly honest," I said, "I think it wouldn't be odd at all if I'd lost to you. You were amazing, Filia."

"Eh he he."

On hearing that, a smile bloomed on Filia's face. She was way too predictable...then again, her sudden turn to delight made me feel a bit awkward still. "Our mission is complete! Let's head home, herb-buddy!"

"Sure."

Odd as Filia's instant recovery seemed, I followed her from behind as always...

At which point a monster leaped out of the tall grass to our right. I recognized its type in an instant. Sure, it was only about the size of a puppy, but it had considerable strength in its forelegs and it was lunging right at Filia.

"Hooah!" A punch from me...

"Haah!" A lightning bolt from her...

“Skreee!” Splorsh...put it together and you get one exploding monster.

“Yuri, can’t you use any kind of magic that’s less...potent?” Filia winced at my right hand.

Yeah, I got what she was getting at. The annihilating strength of my blow meant there were no materials left to harvest. But it wasn’t like I had alternatives.

“Maybe I would if I could, but I don’t have the talent for any magic but muscle magic. I can’t even use practical magic, to be honest.”

Every single other kind of magic was impossibly out of reach for me—and that didn’t seem likely to change any time in the future either. After all...

Filia clapped as if she had just thought of something. “Ah, that reminds me—you don’t have any magical energy, do you, Yuri? Even though magic is ineffective against you, you aren’t able to use it yourself. Doesn’t that feel like an incredibly astonishing waste of talent?”

“Muscle magic is magic though, you know?”

Filia snorted. “If *that* were recognized as magic, it would mark the end of arcane studies.”

“I see. You’re saying that if people got muscles like mine, it could completely close the book on the history of the study of magic, as it would render the whole field worthless.” I flexed thoughtfully.

“That’s—no, that’s not what I meant at all, that’s not it at all!”

Though we bickered a bit, Filia and I managed to finish our first request safely.

A few days later, Filia and I were undertaking yet another request to gather medicinal herbs—I know, I know, I was kinda done with it too—but something about this beginner forest’s atmosphere felt off.

“Filia, something’s strange, right?”

“Hm. Yes, I believe so. Something happened here. There’s an

unusually high amount of residual magic energy,” said Filia, looking grave.

We could both sense it, and whatever “it” was seemed formidable.

“That’s amazin’. Being able to sense residual magical energy and all.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just one of the endless perks of being an elf. How did you notice the abnormality, Yuri?”

“Intuition.” I sniffed. “Smells different than usual, too.”

“Ha! And you call *me* amazing!”

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling. A mysterious presence wafting through the air... Argh, I wanted to travel through this wide world even more! And I wanted to try fighting some strong baddies, too! We just had to muddle through E-Rank first, where they didn’t even assign monster-hunting requests.

The only way to solve that problem all in one go was to lay low and enact my grand plan: “Project Grand Plan to Defeat Monsters While Gathering Medicinal Herbs.”

“Yuri, I forbid you from naming anything whatsoever again for the rest of your natural life so help me Gods.”

“Hey, don’t peek into my mind! So rude...”

Ugh, Filia and her Telepathy. Anyway, back to the matter at hand: this strange presence. It didn’t feel like your usual beginner-forest kind of monster. That probably meant we *really* needed to defeat it. After all, what other option did we have?

“Walking around and looking for it would be a pain in the butt,” I said. “Let’s fly a little.”

“Fly? Yuri, what are you—eeeek!”

I flew.

My body gradually rose through the air, higher and higher, until I was soaring beyond the tree-tops. I took a quick survey to locate the monster—aaand there it was.

The first thing I noticed was its surprisingly long neck. Even standing on all fours, the beastie was almost the same height as the trees—over thirty feet tall, easily. Maybe it was trying to camouflage itself with its surroundings: its body was the same shade of light brown

as the local bark, while its neck and up matched the deep green of the leaves. Its face was covered in shaggy green fur and something yellow sprouted from the top of its head, a banana-lookin' horn kinda thing. After getting a good, long look to make sure I knew where it was, I dropped back down to the ground.

“Found it, Filia.”

“Oh, marvelous, yes, very good, but *what on earth was that?*”

“What was...? Oh! I flew.”

“Uh huh.” Filia gripped her temples.

“If you keep kicking the air before you fall, you can fly, right? That’s basically it, in layman’s terms.”

“Ohhhh. I see. I perfectly understand that what you just said was completely absent of any explanation whatsoever.” Filia sighed through her teeth.

But when I told Filia about the monster I’d spied, her expression stiffened. “Hm. That’s...that sounds like a brokirin. I don’t remember everything about it exactly, but I believe it’s supposed to be a B-Rank monster.”

According to Filia, the brokirin was a monster that attacked by repeatedly swinging its long neck. More importantly, it was highly dangerous, to the point that its mere presence could completely upend the forest’s local habitat.

“Worse yet, any beginner adventurer who came upon it would no doubt be killed. I suppose we have no choice but to exterminate the awful thing. Ah, what an unprofitable job...”

“Enh, looks strong. I’m psyched.”

Anticipation coursed through my body. My heart pounded, my blood raced. Alive. That’s what I was feeling, like I was really *alive*. Existing in the moment, brimming with life!

“Okay, can you cut down on that battle-freak idiot monologue?”

“C’mon, we’re finally gonna face off against an opponent where we can really go all out and hit them with everything we’ve got. Feel that power! Breathe in your destiny!”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

How did she not get it? “Good grief, Filia, this is why you’re so

wei—”

“You’re joking; *I’m* the weird one here?” she balked, wide-eyed.

Well, obviously—anyone *logical*, anyone with *common sense* could recognize I was in the right. Ehh, maybe she just needed time to think it through.

“Never mind, let’s not do this right now. What is our plan, Yuri? Shall we decide on a strategy?”

“Hmm... All right, how about this time around I show you the essence of my muscle magic?” I replied, crossing my arms.

“So you’re saying I won’t be doing anything at all. Is there anything I *can* help with?” she asked.

“Nope!”

“Fine then, I’ll watch you from a distance. I do have good eyesight. Which direction is it coming from?”

“About forty-five degrees to the left, diagonally.”

“Understood. I suppose I’ll watch from atop this tree.”

As Filia said so, she floated up, up, up into the foliage until she perched like a bird on one of the topmost branches of a nearby tree. Wind magic was pretty versatile, huh? I couldn’t imitate *that* with my muscle magic, and it sure looked convenient.

“Ah, I see it...” she murmured. “Wow, it’s huge, isn’t it?”

“Yup. All right, I’m going.”

“Oh, and Yuri?” Just as I was about to rush away, Filia called out to me and stopped me in my tracks. “Do your best. Please don’t die.”

“No worries. I’m going on a rampage,” I said with a thumbs up and a sharp animal smile.

At full speed, I took off into the forest, heading straight for the brokirin. Its presence was strong and clear, and before long there it was, looming in front of me like a nasty ol’ nightmare tree.

“Wow. You sure are a big fella up close.”

The brokirin sensed I was a threat—the second it saw me, it started gathering gold-green streams of magical energy in its mouth.

“That’s what I like to see! Bring it, big boy!”

I drew my right hand back, just a bit. That was all I needed. Even that spare movement threw the brokirin into a panic. It had to be pretty strong, to sense the danger of my muscle magic upon first glance. Pretty good eyes, at least.

With a rumbling roar, the brokirin swung its massive neck like a great green pendulum, then raised its head up high to hammer it back down. Me? I stood my ground and took the attack head-on.

Always good to know what you're dealing with.

"Whaaaa?!" I blocked with my left arm but that thing nearly pounded me into the dirt! It was surprisingly powerful. Guess I'd have to take it seriously.

Trembling with joy, I shucked the limiter in my mind. Power flowed from the depths of my body as my form shifted and changed and an overwhelming might spread through my every cell.

"Sorry, ya jerkass giraffe. Looks like I can't take it easy on you."

The brokirin faced me directly, stood tall, and opened its mouth to blast me with a torrent of magic. I had no idea what was coming—probably a wind magic bullet or something. At the first detection of wind movement, I could evade, but you know what? I didn't *need* to. I firmed up my stance and took the brokirin's second attack head-on as well.

Sharp gusts of wind barreled into me, chapping my cheeks and biting into my flesh. I grinned up at the brokirin, unscathed.

"Pretty nice, pretty nice. Cute, even. If you'd turned that on anyone but me, I guess that would be the end of it, eh? All right, Filia, are you watching closely?" I glanced up at her and her tree-perch. "I'll show you just how amazing my muscle magic is."

As I spoke, I channeled oceans of might into my right arm. The brokirin, once more sensing danger, swung its neck down on me like a wrecking ball, but—too little, too late, you overgrown vegetable.

"Eat this," I said, and took a swing.

I punched through the air. Didn't hit the brokirin directly, but with my limiter released, that punch was anything but your ordinary thrust. I'd trained my fists day and night, night and day, and I could surpass the speed of sound.

A tremendous shockwave roared out from my punch, heading

straight for the brokirin.

With a brutal snap, the brokirin's body exploded into pieces, scattering all over the forest. The only part of it that remained intact was its head, which rolled a couple of feet before flopping unceremoniously onto a clover patch. Fragmented pieces of the brokirin's remains fluttered in midair like falling petals.

"Huh? Did I overdo it?" I muttered.

Wouldn't have thought something like that mean green broccoli machine could be so totally annihilated. I mean, the only thing left was its head. Oof. Well, a pass is a pass.

I do have a name for that punch that exceeds the sound barrier—I call it the "Pistol Punch." It's practically the only long-range spell at my disposal, given that my magic depends on muscle-contact. (By the way, a "pistol" is a certain kind of magic tool—you probably haven't heard of it, so I thought I'd better clarify.)

I examined the brokirin's head laying on the ground. Put up a good fight, I'd say! So that was a B-Rank bogey, huh? In that case, an S-Rank monster would definitely be stronger than me. That meant I'd have to get going on even more intense training. My path set, I headed back to Filia, grinning my head off and ecstatic as could be.

"Yo, Filia, I didn't die."

"Welcome ba—eek! Yuri, what's wrong with your left arm? Show it to me!"

Huh. It was a little swollen, I guess—I hadn't really noticed. Probably from that first hammer attack I let the brokirin hit me with. Taking on that attack while in my normal form had maybe been a little too reckless. Okay, okay, I got a little careless. Something to reflect on.

Filia grabbed my arm with her small, soft hands and frowned. As she did, my arm was enveloped in a gentle white light that shone bright for a moment then faded away. By the time it was gone, my arm had returned to normal.

"Okay. That should be good."

"Oh wow, thanks! You really are amazing. Do I owe you anything for that?"

"You're kidding me. There's no way I'd stoop to taking money from a comrade, especially since we already split the reward for

requests.”

“Filia, you’re a good person.”

“No—no, you don’t. Ugh, shut *uuuuuup*.”

You never knew if she was going to be happy or furious when you praised her, huh. Not quite as cute as you’d think.

“If I might ask, Yuri, what was that last attack? It looked like you made the brokirin, err...explode?”

“That technique? My Pistol Punch. Amazin’, huh? The force of my punch was just like, *BLAM!*”

Filia nodded slowly, looking either doubtful or resigned.

“*BLAM!*” I added for emphasis.

She let out a long, put-upon sigh. “Yuri, I completely understand that you are a being that somehow exists outside the realm of common sense.”

“That guy was pretty tough, though. So my motivation was crashing through the roof, like—*CRAKOOM!*”

“And why was your motivation so high?” asked Filia, and winced like she’d just lit the fuse to a bomb.

Ah. That was right. Because I’d taken care of it, Filia didn’t fight the brokirin. No wonder she seemed so down.

“Sorry. Listen, I know you wanted a piece of that big lug too. How ’bout I teach you a good way to train your muscles and we’ll call it even?”

“You really did just say that with a straight face, hmm? What am I going to do with you, you muscle-brained meathead?”

“Aw shucks, please don’t praise me like that, it’s embarrassin’.”

And Filia let out the loudest sigh yet.

After we returned from the forest, we rushed to the Astarte guild to report our encounter with the brokirin. Such an out-of-place monster in a forest often visited by novice adventurers could be bad news, after

all. Once we got to the guild, we headed straight for the receptionist counter.

“There was a brokirin in the forest?!”

“Yup. Take a look, we even have monster materials.”

I showed the panicked receptionist the yellow thing I’d plucked from the brokirin’s lolling head. Boy was I glad that it didn’t completely explode without leaving anything behind at all. If I didn’t have proof, the receptionist not only might not believe me, she might think I was trying to pull one over on her.

“Y-yes, this does look like the fruit that grows atop the brokirin’s head.” The receptionist nodded sharply. “We are sincerely grateful for you reporting this information to us.”

In a flash, the receptionist girl dashed to the room behind the counter, disappearing from view. I lingered by the counter and scratched the nape of my neck. This seemed pretty urgent after all. It didn’t look like she was rushing to get me in trouble or anything, so I could probably relax.

It occurred to me then that while things were slow, I could take care of selling the materials. I made for the counter on the opposite side of the guild, but I’d barely taken a step when someone called out to me.

“Excuse me, fella, do you have a minute?”

The person behind me was a sharp-looking man with a full head of spiky blond hair. For all his wild features, he looked to be no more than twenty years old or so.

“Who’re you?” I asked.

This guy...was overflowing with sheer power. The monsters in the Forest of Death? Dust motes in his piercing blond hair. The brokirin? A midday snack.

“Oh, me? Heh. I’m Babandongas. I’m an adventurer just like you and the little missy over there,” said the man matter-of-factly. “That’s a real nice lookin’ monster part you got right there. How about you sell it to me? I’ll pay you for it, properly.”

“Why should I do that?”

“Ah, well... See, I got me a kid sister. Her birthday’s comin’ right up, and wouldn’t you know, I’m almost outta time to get her a gift. The

fruit on top of the brokirin's head is called an 'overhead fruit' but it ain't nothin' of the sort. We're talking a high-quality magic stone here. As luck would have it, my kid sister happens to like stones of the magical variety. More unfortunately, they're a bit of a pain to find, so you don't see an opportunity like this often." Babandongas vigorously scratched his spiky hair, perhaps to hide his embarrassment.

Hm. He didn't seem to be lying. I couldn't detect any ill will, either.

"What do you think, Filia?"

She shrugged. "It's fine with me. Besides, it's not mine to sell in the first place."

"In that case, I'm good with it, too," I replied. If Filia and her Telepathy said it was fine, then it was definitely fine. I handed the monster's fruit over to Babandongas.

"Really? I can't thank you enough!" he exclaimed.

With that, we traded the stone for a good amount of cash.

Babandongas went on as he counted out our pay: "You seriously helped me out here. My kid sister, she's really been buggin' me about this magic stone. I even went into that Forest of Death—you know the one, pretty vicious—to hunt down some monsters, but I couldn't get my hands on a single good one. There was talk that there's an ultra-strong humanoid monster living deep in the forest there, too, but I never saw anything of that sort. All talk, I figure."

After saying his piece, Babandongas turned on his heel and headed out of the guild, brimming with delight.

"Can I ask you one thing before you go?" I called out.

"Hm? What is it?" Babandongas turned to face us.

I pointed to his spiky head of hair. "Your head looks like it's erupting. Are you okay?"

"Ah, nah! It's just a hairstyle, man, nothin' more!"

And with that, our business was done. We left the guild and returned to the inn.

"That man looked quite strong, wouldn't you say?" Filia mused.

"Yeah. He might be even stronger than me."

If I were still living in the forest, I probably wouldn't have encountered anyone with anywhere close to that level of power. What else could be out there in the wide, dangerous world? I could hardly wait to find out!

"That look on your face again?" Filia ran a hand down her cheek. "The battle-loving idiot is daydreaming again, I see."

"I'm not a battle-loving idiot. Call me the Great Muscle Fanboy."

"A muscle fanboy," said Filia flatly. "You *really* think that sounds any better, do you?"

"Mu-SCLE, Mu-SCLE!"

"Okay, so to be perfectly clear, now you're just chanting the word muscle. That's not communication. That's just the word muscle. And you're...you're still doing it. There's nothing there, Yuri, it is *just* the word *muscle*, please use your *words*, I am *going* to *lose* my *mind*."

Ah, Filia! Being unable to understand Muscle Talk just meant she had a long way to go in the art of muscle training. I had faith in her: if anyone could learn the lingo, it was my sharp elven buddy.

Chapter 5: Searching for Pets Is Your Specialty?

MUSCLE MORNING comes early. For me, it starts right after a good night's sleep of one hour, and then it's straight on to muscle training. Because I hadn't found as much time for working out since leaving the forest, my early morning routine was precious.

Filia woke several hours later. "Morning, Yuri." She yawned as she sat up in bed and rubbed her eyes. Hm. It seemed like Filia was weak in the morning. When she woke up, she spoke in a somewhat childish manner.

"Oh, mornin'."

"What are you doing?" asked Filia, eyeing me up like she'd stumbled on something suspicious.

"Oh this? See, I stand on one toe with one leg, and right now I'm doing an air chair," I answered, proudly swaying my floating leg through the air.

"Okay, but what are you *doing*?" From suspicion to exasperation. I didn't think I was doing anything strange, but I guess air chairs just aren't an elf thing.

"Tell you what," I said, "I recommend you train your muscles. Want to do it together?"

"You recommend—oh, come on, you muscle-headed lug! I'll pass, thank you very much."

"I see. Shame."

Now that Filia was awake, it marked the beginning of today's adventuring. We had breakfast, left the inn, and headed for the guild. I intended to take on another medicinal herb-gathering request like usual, so I made my way over to the request bulletin board to pick up one of the relevant notices.

Today, though, Filia called out to me, her voice like a clear bell. "Yuri, how about we take a quest other than gathering herbs once in a while?"

“You listen to more than enough of my selfish requests, so that’s fine. But why?”

“Why, being an adventurer is a beautifully meaningful thing! We two are but heroic servants of society at large!” Filia gave a poster-girl smile and an emphatic thumbs-up.

Very cute! Also? Come on. “And your real reason?”

“If I have to fight another big stupid monster, I’m going to dig a hole and live underground for the rest of my long and gorgeous life. Which would be a terrible waste of my beauty, by the by.”

“Hmm...” I put my finger to my chin and thought about it. Sure, I wanted to keep playing around with monsters every day, but it would be no good for me to just ignore my partner’s opinion. Without mutual trust, how could we become a real team?

“Precisely!” said Filia, snapping her fingers and giving me a wink.

“Mind reading’s rude.”

Filia stuck her pink tongue at me, let out a tiny “tee hee,” and lightly tapped herself on the head. She was a cunning one. Too cunning. But she was right—I had to go along with what Filia wanted now and again.

“Okay, got it. Let’s take a different kind of request today.”

“Levelheaded, responsible Yuri! I do appreciate a man who knows when to take orders.”

“All right, then, which request should we do?”

“Let’s decide together. Oh goodness, this is the first time we’re doing some *real* collaborative work, wouldn’t you say? Just think about it! Why, doesn’t it make you all excited? Doesn’t your heart go wild in your chest? Ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump!” Filia finished the onslaught with a perfect bat of her eyelashes.

There is nothing more dangerous than a beautiful girl aware of her own cuteness. I shifted my gaze down to my rockin’ bod to avoid her charisma attacks.

“I don’t get it,” I said. “That sounds more like the feelin’ I get when I look at muscles.”

“I...I’ve been defeated by muscles. I’ve been defeated by *his own muscles*.” Filia took a deep, shaky breath and swooned onto the floor of

the guild in front of the gods and everyone.

It took a while for us to decide, but in the end we went for the request that said “my pet is gone,” which...when I thought about it, wasn’t really a *request*, was it? Normally I’d expect to see something like “please find my kitty” or something. Ah, well. After we got the location of the client’s home, we left the guild and made our way there.

There was nothing out of the ordinary about the house, except that it was kind of exciting for both of us by dint of being in a town and not in an elven village or the Forest of Death or whatever.

“This is the place, right?”

“Appears to be, yes.”

I knocked on the door. Not long after, footsteps approached on the other side of the door, and fast—thump thump thump. The door swung open so quickly it nearly smacked into the wall, and standing before us was a young girl. She looked guarded at the sight of us.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m Yuri. This is Filia. We came here to take on your request.”

I showed her the guild form, at which she relaxed a little—enough to let us inside, at least.

“My, my,” said Filia to the girl, “you are quite the lovely young lady.”

“Oh my gosh, thank you! You’re super cute too, miss!”

Filia squeed. “Ah ha ha, you think so? That means a great deal coming from *you*!”

The two of them seemed to be getting excited, but I hadn’t the faintest idea why and couldn’t seem to nose my way into the conversation besides. In fact, the girl wouldn’t even really look at me. Was she...was she scared of me? My muscles were being restrained right now, so my current form didn’t look that much different from an average guy, but...ah, no, it all made sense. My sheer muscley energy could, at times, overflow like an aura, and especially capable people could sense it. Science.

Which meant that despite her childish looks, this girl was quite capable.

“Thank you so much for accepting our request,” said the girl’s

mother, who came to meet us in their sitting room.

I was feeling kind of left out, so I focused on asking the mother about the pet's distinctive characteristics. According to her, the girl's pet was a monster called a pseudog, which *resembled* a dog, but was in fact a monster. Even so, it was a docile creature with a fair degree of intelligence and was apparently a common enough pet. I'd actually seen people strolling around with pet monsters all over this town. And, eh, it seemed like a reasonable enough thing to do with your life.

The pseudog we were looking for had black fur and stood at about a foot tall. The other day, when the girl and her pseudog had been out on a walk, it suddenly started pouring rain and the pseudog got spooked by a roll of thunder. Poor thing ran off somewhere.

"And I still haven't seen Cocoa anywhere at all! Oh, Cocoa, *sniff!*" the young girl sobbed.

"Don't worry, honey. This young woman and man will definitely find him for us," the mother soothed her.

The young girl—Sharon—spoke so sorrowfully. Even if this Cocoa was a monster, it was a beloved pet. For Sharon, it was probably more like a proper member of her family. Though...Cocoa seemed like a pretty tame name for a monster dog, didn't it?

I didn't really understand family stuff that well, but looking at those tears, I knew I wanted to find this girl's pet. Losing someone you've loved for a long time is painful. I understood that much.

"Ma'am, do you have anything that still has Cocoa's scent on it? Like a favorite toy or anything? It doesn't have to be clean. A dirty one's better, actually."

"Oh, in that case...this bone-shaped plush was her favorite. She was always playing with it, though it seemed she'd been getting bored of it recently, so I don't particularly mind what you do with it."

The mother handed me the plush, and I pushed it up to my mighty nostrils.

"Yuri," said Filia. "Really, now? Really? *Now?*"

Ignoring the disgust in Filia's tone, I analyzed the scent. The fragrance of perfume...that was the lady of the house! And ah, below it, I could detect the unique musk of that dire beast, fell Cocoa... The hunt was on.

“All right, I’ve got the scent. We’ll start searching the town now. Let’s go, Filia.”

“Huh? I’m sorry, what purpose do I serve at this point in the mission? Wouldn’t it be better to—”

“If you don’t come, I’m not sharing the reward for completing the request.”

No way was I going to let her take reward money for this “great collaboration” she’d been so excited about if I was the only one running around doing any of the work.

“Oh, no, come now, clearly I was only being hypothetical, dear Yuri! Sharon, please wait just a bit, if you would. We’ll come right back, okay?”

“Okay!”

Filia’s attitude immediately changed the second I threatened her payday. Boy, her mood sure picked up quick, huh?

“What’s the matter?” asked Filia, a puzzled look on her face.

“Nothing, really.”

We hiked back into the town to search for Cocoa and there began to track her scent. My nose never lost its prey once I got a lock on it. Not *my* nose—the very idea was unthinkable!

“This way. Follow me.”

“All right, I’ll shoot: what is the deal with your nose, Yuri?”

I sniffed the air, my nose twitching with effort. Filia stared into the dark and powerful abyss of my mighty nostrils, and the abyss stared back.

“Filia, anyone can do this much if they train.”

“To be clear, you’re talking about training your nose. Your nose,” she repeated helplessly.

Normally, my nose was just like any other person’s, but if I concentrated, I could ramp that baby up to dog-level. For me, this request wasn’t difficult at all.

As we tracked the dire pseudog Cocoa through Astarte, the shadows lengthened, the roads narrowed, and we stepped into a dark and sunless alley. Just a few more meters and there—a moving

silhouette. One that matched Cocoa's characteristics! All black, foot tall —gotcha.

"There she is."

"Seems so."

As I drew closer, the little fuzzball let out a deep, throaty growl to intimidate me. Pet or no, a monster was still a monster. That growl was pretty good, too, a real gravelly snarl with a decent oomph to it. But if I kept drawing closer at this snail's pace, Cocoa might turn tail and flee. Maybe counter-intimidation was the answer?

"Awoooo!" I howled.

Cocoa stumbled back. "Yaaarrff?!" she yelped.

One more howl and Cocoa was tucking her tail between her legs and curled up into a ball. As she shivered and trembled, I jogged over and scooped up the little troublemaker.

Another request complete!

With that, we took the whimpering Cocoa back to the client's house. Upon seeing the fuzzy dark lump of pseudog quaking in my arms, Sharon broke out into a huge smile.

"Yayyyyyy! Thank you, Miss Filia! And, um..."

"He's Yuri," Filia whispered in Sharon's ear.

"Thank you, Yuri!"

"No prob."

Sharon and her mother were overjoyed. A part of me was dissatisfied that I hadn't been able to go one-on-one in a hair-raising fight with a strong opponent, but on the other hand...I'd made this family happy. I liked that.

Maybe doing requests like this now and again was worthwhile after all.

"Was I even needed this time around?" muttered Filia on our way back to the guild.

"Uh, no?"

"Then *why* did you take me *with* you? Peak lazing time is done for the day. I've followed you round and round and I did not get to be

even a *little* slothful.” Filia pouted, kicking a pebble on the side of the road.

“You’re the one who was going on and on about collaboration, though.”

“That was the Filia of this morning. She has passed on. *This* Filia wanted naps. And snacks! And more naps.”

I managed not to roll my eyes, though it took me *much* muscle power.

“The truth is, you resolved everything on your own this time, Yuri. So for all of your excuses, there wouldn’t have been a single problem even if I *did* hang back at the house with Sharon. So why, oh, why did you bring me along?” A devilish look crossed her face. “Oh dear, could it be—yes, I suspect it is!—that perhaps you were overwhelmed by your yearning for me? By your burning desire to always remain in the sunlight of my company! How terribly embarrassing!”

Filia covered her face with her hands in a clownish display of fake-bashfulness. It didn’t work on me, but everyone passing by couldn’t help eyeing the lovely sulking waif.

“You’re right,” I admitted. “It was because I didn’t want to be the only one stuck doing it. It was a pain in the butt, you know.”

If it had been a battle, I would’ve happily taken it on solo, but pet rescue? I don’t think I really had the motivation to go out and get that done of my own free will.

“Hmph! I see you’re just ignoring my tour-de-force performance as ‘the tragic elven ingenue.’ And thank you very much for your most vicious and thoughtless response!”

“Don’t thank me, there’s no reason.”

“What an incredibly high-quality set of ears you have. So good at only hearing your favorite parts of the conversation. I’m really quite envious,” she said, flicking the point of her own ear absently.

“Took years of training for these, yep.”

“Do I need to hang a sign around my neck when I’m sarcastic?”

Hm? What was Filia talking about? She really needed to train her muscles more, because she clearly didn’t know what she was talking

about.

Filia sighed. “Yuri, there really is nothing in that muscle-brain of yours *but* muscles, eh?”

“Hey! Did you just read my mind?”

“You were being rude, too,” said Filia, then she pulled her eyelid down and stuck her tongue out at me.

Wow, how does a gorgeous person look so pretty even when they’re making a funny face like that? I needed to be careful or she’d get my heart racing, and that’d be no good at all.

“H-huh?” blurted Filia.

“Hey, what are you staring into space for? We’re here, let’s turn in the request.”

Leaving Filia, who was blushing and standing in place for some reason, I entered the guild and went to report our completed request to the receptionist.

“Pardon me, sir, but you already found it? Search requests usually take a bit of time.”

“My nose is even sharper than a dog’s. You know, because I work out.”

“I-I see. Well then, here is your reward for successfully completing the request.”

After that brief exchange with the receptionist, she handed me the reward money. Just then, Filia finally entered the guild. She scurried over to join me.

“I would appreciate it if my *partner* didn’t leave me all alone, loitering outside.”

“You were the one who just stopped by the door, though.”

“Grr, well, I suppose that’s a logical argument...”

“I would never use an illogical one.”

“Fine, sure, whatever you say,” said Filia, shaking her head.

“Okay, well, how was it? Did doing a request other than gathering herbs feel like a good change of pace?” I asked.

“You know what? Yes, it did. What about you, Yuri?”

“Well, it wasn’t bad. I think it might be good to take those kinds of requests every once in a while.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Filia grinned at me. A genuine smile from a beauty like Filia really was amazing. Dazzling, even, as if a second sun shone into the guild and brightened the worn furniture.

“But for the time being, we’ll go back to gathering herbs tomorrow,” I said.

At which point Filia hung her head low and let out the phlegmiest, whiniest “ugh” I’d heard yet, and just like that, all that extra sunlight zipped outta the room.

Chapter 6:

You Can't Judge People Based on Their Looks

“LET’S GO OUT SHOPPING!” Filia cried maybe thirty seconds after waking up, raising up her right arm like she was reporting for duty.

“Shopping? What are you going to buy?”

“Clothes! Look at this old outfit. How long have I been wearing it? I’ll answer for you, dear Yuri: *too* long. It’s about time I change it up.” Filia picked up her light white dress and lifted it high. Come to think of it, I hadn’t seen Filia wear anything except for that dress outside and the pajamas she wore indoors.

“You don’t really bother with what’s fashionable right now, do you, Filia? You not interested in that kind of thing?”

“Oh, I’ve been there, done that. Fashion is rather bothersome. As long as I have one outfit, isn’t that enough?”

Filia didn’t just have magic suitable for battle at her disposal; she also knew several spells for everyday living—or practical magic spells, as they call ’em. You know, spells that could remove dirt or stains from clothing, or spells to make small objects float through the air and into arm’s reach. Because Filia could instantly do laundry with her practical magic, just one outfit was probably enough for her.

Elves were amazing, for sure... But knowing Filia, a good quantity of her magic had to be devoted to making her life more convenient.

“You know, the image I have of you in my head has changed somehow.”

“Changed for the better, I would hope,” said Filia, drawing closer to me, a fascinated look on her face...

“Into a muscle one.”

At which point Filia immediately stopped approaching. “Sometimes I really don’t think we understand one another, Yuri.”

I tried to clarify. “It’s just that I don’t have any interest in clothes, either. Thus, a sense of camaraderie is born, already blazing between us!”

“Hurray,” said Filia. “Listen, it’s not like I’m *not* interested in fashion. It’s just that there’s...so *much* of it! Too much. And I am a very busy woman.”

“Don’t be embarrassed.”

“I’m not embarrassed.”

Okay, sure, she wasn’t embarrassed.

With that, we made our way to the largest clothing store in Astarte. It was way bigger than I’d expected, and they had just about everything, from what I recognized as your normal every day shirts, trousers, dresses, and the like to odd things that didn’t seem like clothing at all!

“Since we came all the way here, guess I should buy something too, huh?” I pondered aloud.

I collected some clothing that worked for me—shirt, trouser, vest, jacket, you know—and went ahead and bought ’em. Because my clothes always got torn to shreds whenever I showed off my muscles, I could never have enough outfits.

“Thank you very much, sir!”

“Thank *you*.”

Having wrapped up my own shopping, I headed over to the women’s clothing section. There I found Filia with a finger to her chin and a serious look on her face. “Hmm.”

“Still haven’t decided?”

“A *Lady* must take her time to be certain of an outfit’s capacity for cuteness.”

All this despite being fine with one outfit just a few hours ago? Really?

“It’s exactly *because* I’m fine with one outfit that I must make sure it is the absolute cream of the crop! That is the way of a true capital-L *Lady*.”

“I see. That aside, don’t peek inside my head.”

Filia responded with a long, bouncy “Sorryyyyyyy” that didn’t sound like she was feeling remotely apologetic. Eh, no big deal—she wasn’t acting *that* outlandishly.

“Nevertheless,” she declared, gazing through the ceiling of the store to the heavens themselves, “I simply cannot decide...”

Filia wandered about the store wearing a look of deep thought. Occasionally she took some clothes in hand, but almost immediately she’d throw them right back. Again, again, again... When would it end?

Maybe I could start muscle training while I waited? The instant that thought went through my mind, Filia clapped her hands together—whap!—as if she had to give her good idea a little slap before using it.

“That’s it! Since you’re here, I want you to choose an outfit for me, Yuri.”

“Me...? I don’t mind doing it, but do you really trust my taste?”

“Think of it this way: if you pick something I don’t like, we’ll be here even longer. Then you’ll just have to keep choosing forever and ever until you find something I *do* like. See? It’s going to be all right!”

“That is not what that phrase means.”

How long would this shopping trip take, doing it her way? I sighed—I’d probably need to put some serious thought into this, eh? Focusing intently, I used my sharp eyes to scan the entire store.

“Hm...”

There it was, a thing of beauty: a black outfit with dozens of dumbbells hanging from it. I could sense some serious heft energy (heftergy) emanating from it, and more importantly, it would be ideal for muscle training. On top of that, the description note attached to the outfit caught my interest.

“*‘You’ll get jacked just from wearing this!’* Filia, don’t you want to be jac—”

“I have no interest in being ‘jacked,’ as you say! This isn’t for *you* to wear, Yuri, this is for *me*. If I wore that, I wouldn’t be able to take a single step, would I?” She gazed upon the outfit I’d suggested with icy incredulity.

Okay, hmm. Right. These weren’t clothes for me, but for Filia. In that case, I needed to pick something with Filia’s point of view in mind...which I could never figure out to begin with! On top of that, I had absolutely no idea what kind of clothing she even wanted. Ugh, growing up in the forest really didn’t leave much time to think about what any other humans might be thinking, let alone what kind of

clothes they'd pick out!

What in the world was I supposed to do?

While I was "hmm, hmm-ing" to myself, Filia came up behind me and patted me on the shoulder with her delicate hand.

"Yuri, Yuri! Here, this is for you, Yuri."

In her palm was a loop made of some kind of braided, colored thread. She handed it to me. It seemed she had bought it while I was agonizing.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's called a misanga. It's a good luck charm! If you wear it on your arm, your wish will come true when the bracelet threads wear out and snap."

"Huh. So it can grant a wish? Thanks." I tied the so-called good luck bracelet on my wrist.

"Yuri, what are you going to wish for?" asked Filia cheerfully, looking at my arm.

A wish, huh...? I'd never really thought about that kind of thing before either.

"Hm, yeah... How about 'to be able to fight strong people'?"

Filia sniffed. "An awfully barbaric wish for such a cute charm."

"Okay, let's go with 'to travel the world and have fun.'"

"Rather basic for a *wish*, wouldn't you say?"

Yeesh, what a demanding person. Then again, maybe she had a point. What was a more suitable wish for me...?

"Aww yeah, I got it! 'May the splendor of muscles be spread throughout the world.' Dig it!"

"Wouldn't you know, I may prefer the other wish."

"Nope, this is the one. Just think about it—people really are strange outside of the forest. Take a gander!" I tossed away my coat and bulked up, my muscles expanding and my height shooting up. All around the store, people gasped and shrank away—or dedicatedly averted their eyes like I was some kind of creeper. Looking down from my fortress of muscles, I pressed my point. "See? It's *weird*. Why aren't these beautiful muscles properly appreciated? No matter how you slice

it, people are just bizarre!”

Filia remained silent, not looking me in the eye. What was it? Was she charmed by my muscles? “Yuri,” she said slowly. “That misanga bracelet?”

“Yeah! My wish is—”

“It just snapped.”

“Ah.” I noticed the shredded pieces on the floor. When my muscles expanded, they had torn it to pieces.

“Yuri, I bought it especially for you! But you don’t even care, do you? Well, fine! Neither do I!” Filia huffed and spun around to turn her back to me.

“S-sorry, Filia. It wasn’t on purpose. I’m sorry!”

I shrank to my limited size and stumbled over an apology. Perhaps it had some effect because Filia reluctantly turned around again, though she was still pouting.

“Then if you *really mean it*, please pick some clothes that will actually suit me, and take it seriously! If you keep fooling around, I’ll get *really* mad.”

“O-okay.”

I hadn’t been fooling around or anything since the start—not once!—but this really wasn’t the right time to say so. I absolutely couldn’t fail, not this time!

Poring over the countless outfits, I examined everything, scrutinizing each item to find something that perfectly suited my companion. I summoned up the well of concentration I usually reserved for muscle training and set it upon this vital task—the task of finding an outfit that just shrieked “Filia!”

At last, I had my answer.

“Behold!”

I had picked out a complete outfit, down to the socks. A sleeveless dress first, a little more loose-fitting than what Filia was wearing right now—white, with pink gradation closer to the hem. On top of that, a long pink vest with green frills on the shoulders, and to top it off, white thigh-high socks. Filia carefully considered the outfit like a detective interviewing a suspect.

“Hm. So this is what you’re into, eh, Yuri?”

“N-no, I just thought it’d suit you, Filia.”

I was still a little anxious. I’d selected this outfit based on my intuition, after all. It probably *would* suit Filia—what wouldn’t?—but would she accept it?

“I see,” Filia mumbled, as if she were talking to herself, bending down to assess the outfit from top to bottom. Was it my imagination, or were her lips curving into a slight smile?

“Did I pass?” I asked.

“I’ll make an exception and forgive you this time around. I will cherish this outfit and wear it often. Thank you very much,” said Filia, bowing her head to me slightly.

I let out a deep sigh of relief. Thank goodness; the outfit met her standards. We’d only just come together as a team, and we hadn’t really been together that long, but there wasn’t really anyone else I found as gosh darn *likeable* as Filia. If I flubbed up on something as simple as this and it broke up our partnership, it would be too terrible to bear, and hella embarrassing to boot.

Since Filia said she wanted to put on the outfit before we went home, I waited for her outside the fitting room and did some anxious toe-raises.

At last, she stepped out with a cheerful, “Thank you for waiting!” and I went speechless.

Filia gripped the hem of her dress, looking slightly embarrassed. The white and pink were unspeakably cute on her, and her beautiful, porcelain-white thighs peeked out between the top of her thigh-high socks and the hem of her dress. She was captivating. Peerless, even.

Argh, I had to calm down! No getting seduced!

Biceps, obliques, femorals, pectorals, laterals...I started chanting the names of muscles in my mind to calm myself down. The universe had to be testing me. If my heart was swayed by something like this, how could I hope to devote myself to the ultimate cause of muscle?

“What do you say, Yuri? Does it suit me?” asked Filia, tilting her head to one side.

Deltoids, abs, triceps. Must...resist...this devilry!

“Well,” I said with perfect calmness. “I guess it kinda suits you?”

The power of muscles remains unmatched.

“Oh?” Filia batted her platonically ideal eyelashes. “Are you embarrassed, by any chance?”

“Nope!”

And so we *safely* finished our clothes shopping.



From there, we made our way toward the guild...only to find a sizable crowd on the main street and, somewhere beyond the crowd, the scent of blood. Danger. And if it *wasn't* danger, blood still wasn't a good smell to pick up in the middle of a town.

The crowd just kept getting bigger, in any case, which meant *something* had to be going on. Just when I was about to climb a building or fly to see if I could get a better look, a full head of spiky blond hair bobbed into view.

Hey, it was that guy, the one we sold the monster material to the other day! Named, uh...what was it again?

"Oh, hey, you two," he said, jogging over to us. "What are you doing here?"

"Blonda-volcanos-guy," I said, nodding confidently.

"Babandongas! Cryin' out loud, at least remember a guy's name. Especially a name like mine. It's got character!"

"Sorry, it's just that your head has way more impact than your name."

"Don't blame me for your crappy memory!"

I nodded over toward the crowd. "You know what happened here?"

"A murder, looks like."

"Murder, huh?"

Murder. That definitely sounded dangerous. In the few days we'd spent here, I'd built up a pretty good impression of public order in Astarte, but apparently I was, er, dead wrong.

Babandongas gave a grim nod. "Yeah. There's been an outbreak of 'em—they suspect a serial killer. One who kills indiscriminately with some kind of blade. They've been calling the guy 'the Grim Reaper.' He sounds like a real piece of work. They say even the local knights have been struggling to deal with him."

"So, he's strong? Well now, that's what I like to hear." My blood was starting to race, pumping in my veins. I hadn't met any especially

strong foes lately, after all. I really wanted to take this guy on!

“Hey, what’re your names?” asked Babandongas quietly, peering at the two of us.

“Yuri.”

“I’m Filia.”

“I can sense it. You’re pretty strong, aren’t ya? But be that as it may, you really shouldn’t let your guard down. That’s just a bit of advice from your senior.”

Babandongas really was a decent, trustworthy sort of guy, huh? Made me feel bad for making fun of his head. Still, there was one last thing I had to tell him.

I wagged my finger in his face. “Tsk, tsks, tsks. I appreciate your words of warning, but—putting me, the human, aside—Filia is an elf, you know? You’d better not go assuming she’s as young as she looks.”

Babandongas frowned and peered at Filia, scanning her from top to bottom with a newly wary eye. Finally, he shuddered and spoke through trembling lips. “I can barely imagine this cute girl could be older than me. D-don’t tell me she’s more than one hundred years old?”

Oof. Suddenly jumping straight to triple digits? He had some pluck...but he was far too naïve.

“I think it’s even worse than that. Filia is wise in the arts of deception and seduction. My guess is she’s a little over four hundr—”

“Oh my *gods*, I’m *seventeen* and I am standing *right here!* I remember telling you that when we first met, Yuri! Your memory *can’t* be that dreadful, can it?” she snapped. “Hmph!”

Angry Filia may have been about as threatening as a newborn puppy, but that was no reason not to apologize.

“Ba-ban-don-gas,” I said, stretching out each syllable for emphasis. “Asking a woman her age? *Unbelievable*. Don’t you have any sense of decorum?”

Babandongas jumped. “I-It’s my fault?!”

“No, Babandongas, it’s Yuri’s fault,” said Filia, running her palm down her face.

“Yeah. My bad. Sorry.”

Bah. My plan was in vain. Reality is cruel.

I thought we might get to continue chatting with Babandongas, but he suddenly cut the conversation short.

“Whoops. Sorry, but I need to be going. I’m worried about my kid sister.”

Ah, that was right, Babandongas said he had a younger sister who was fond of magic stones. With a serial killer on the loose, who wouldn’t be worried about their loved ones?

“You’re always thinking of your little sister, aren’t you?” asked Filia.

“Yup. Voltemia’s my reason for living, after all.”

Filia blinked. “W-wow, that’s intense...”

“I just want to do what I can for her, you know? Welp, Voltemia’s waiting for me, so I’ll see you guys around.” With that, Babandongas took off.

“What a lovely person,” said Filia. “He’s quite thoughtful, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. I get the feeling he might be taking it a little too far, though.”

To say that your sister is your “reason for living” didn’t sound normal. Now muscle training, *that* was a cause worth getting up for.

“So then,” I said, “How about we go to meet this Grim Reaper?”

“Pardon me, right now?”

“If we don’t, there’ll be more victims, right?”

“That’s...” Filia twisted her mouth for a moment. “That’s a sound argument, Yuri. How unusual, to hear such a thing from you.”

Come on, even I thought about other people sometimes! And also, I had to admit, I thought about beating them up if they were super strong.

“All right, so that’s your plan for the day,” said Filia. “But how would we find such a man?”

“We’ll use my muscley nostrils,” I replied, pointing at my nose. “If we follow the scent of the victim’s blood, it should lead us to the culprit.”

Filia clapped her hands and smiled. “Ha! Fascinating! Your nose really is a marvel, eh?” Filia leaned her face in close to mine—or rather, to my nose. Too cute, too close! Why did she have to do things like that? “You’re usually so... Well, you know, but you have moments of real cleverness, don’t you?”

What did she mean by “you know”? What *did* I know? “I’m always clever. I’m an intellectual, you know.”

“No need for jokes, Yuri; I already can’t take you seriously. You know, you truly are, with all due respect, usually lacking in the brains department. This is the era for intelligent characters. Intelligent characters like,” she puffed out her small, thoroughly unmuscled chest, “a certain Filia!”

I gave her a sideways glance, remembered myself, and immediately averted my eyes. “Your pectoral muscles are lacking,” I mumbled. “Train more.”

“This has absolutely nothing to do with my chest! You absolute idiot, Yuri!” she snapped, hugging her body as if to hide her all-too-thin chest. Enough of that, though. It was time to track the scent of our killer. The Grim Reaper, huh? I was pretty *scythed* to challenge the guy.

Chapter 7: The Man Called the Grim Reaper

WHILE WE WALKED through Astarte, keeping a wary eye out, the scent of blood became stronger with each step. However, there was one thing I was concerned about: Filia. Ever since we started tracking the Grim Reaper, Filia hadn't uttered a single word. She might've been quiet to let me concentrate, but even still, her expression was all doom and gloom.

But no matter how hard I tried, I never understood other people's thoughts on my own. I had to ask Filia straight out. "Hey, something's clearly bothering you. What's up?"

Filia's eyes darted about, her gaze shifting here and there, but eventually, finally, she spoke. "Don't you think I'll just be in your way?"

In my way? I didn't understand what she was talking about. How could I ever think my unbelievable magician companion, Filia Windia, was in my way?

"I'm more than confident in my magic," she continued, "but shall we be honest? When it comes to battle, Yuri, I'm...weak, compared to you. I'm afraid that if I tag along in a situation like this, I'll just be a burden."

A burden, huh? I guess I understood that as a valid concern Filia might have, but...

"It's fine. We're partners, okay? You're never a burden, not ever. Besides, Filia, you're incredibly strong! As long as this Grim Reaper fella isn't just *ridiculously* hardcore, I doubt you'll be any kind of concern—more like you're going to concern *him*. Okay?"

"Heh. That's nice, Yuri. What, did you hit your head or something?" she asked, lightly smacking herself on the pate.

At least it looked like she was done brooding.

"Those are just my honest thoughts," I said with a shrug.

"Hm. Well, then, I understand your feelings. I still don't know what exactly I'm supposed to do while your muscle-trained nose roots out a serial killer by smelling the victim's blood, so I'll stay a bit behind

and keep watch. How does that sound?”

“Are you okay with that?” I asked tentatively. Did she really not want to be in the fight?

“Yes. Or, *hmm*, perhaps you’d rather I keep you company?” she asked with a giggle (“tee hee!”) and a teasing smile.

I responded with a simple snort. I couldn’t even begin to fathom not wanting to face a worthy opponent, but I wasn’t about to criticize her. If Filia didn’t join the fight, that was more fight for me.

The lingering scent of the Grim Reaper grew ever stronger. No, not this road. What about that way? Hmm. The distance between us shrank, little by little.

“This way. Follow me.”

“Understood.”

Once the scent became strong enough that my nose was practically throbbing, I came to a halt. The scent trail led into a desolate building on the edge of town, some kind of abandoned ruin of cobwebs and rotting wood.

“Looks like the Grim Reaper is in there. Filia, will you wait for me out here?”

Keeping her outside the place really would be the best option—she could get a read on what was going on inside without risking getting dragged into the battle.

Filia nodded. “I understand. Please...be careful, Yuri.”

“Yeah.” I nodded, turned, and ducked under a fallen piece of timber to enter the abandoned building.

Everything inside the place was coated with a thick layer of dust, and every breath pulled the foul stuff into my lungs. I scanned the area for any hint of movement. A solitary spider lurked in a crevice in the corner, and on the dust-covered floor...I detected a thin trace of a footprint.

No one lived here, of that I had no doubt. In all likelihood, it was a temporary hideout. I moved through the front room carefully, keeping my footsteps silent. Through the remains of a doorway, I arrived in a wide-open room.

As I crossed the threshold, I felt some kind of pressure—like an

electric tingle—run through me. No, sharper than that, almost as if the tip of a blade were being pressed to my throat. Whew, I could *sense* it—I couldn't let my guard down around this opponent, not for a split-second.

Just as I had that thought, I spied him, almost as if he'd manifested from the gloom. I glared at the man now standing in the center of the room.

He was clad in black, head-to-toe, but the clothes were strange to me—I think it was called a kimono or something, if I remembered right. I'd seen that kind of robe in an illustration in a book; it was said to be worn by foreign warriors called samurai.

Black kimono, black hair, black heart. He was a Grim Reaper through and through. A terrifying presence hung about him, but it had an ephemeral quality, too. Like the moment you took your eyes off of him, he'd vanish. That was how it felt, finally meeting him.

“Are you the Grim Reaper?”

The man stared into my eyes unblinking. Though he looked scrawny at first glance, he was actually lean and toned. Together with his pale face, he really was eerie as hell.

“Indeed, I am. I never deigned to name myself that, but the people of this town have deemed me so, and so I shall be. And what shall I call you?” asked the Grim Reaper, in a low, hoarse voice.

“I'm Yuri. I wanna fight strong people. You ready to face me?”

“As you wish. I never refuse a duel. I will grant you the death you so clearly desire, the same gift I generously bestowed upon those criminals.”

As he said that, the Grim Reaper took his sheathed sword in hand with one smooth, relaxed motion. The pressure emanating from his body sharpened. He was even better than I'd expected!

Interesting. I could count on one hand the number of people who'd ever made me feel this way. If I didn't come at him with my full power right from the start, it'd be bad news for ol' Yuri.

Trembling with delight, I removed the limiter on my muscles. I billowed up into my true form and readied my fists, all the while shaking with pure excitement. The thrill of facing a strong opponent was a pleasure that surpassed everything else.

The Grim Reaper, still holding his sheathed sword at the ready, opened his mouth the slightest bit, his words passing quiet through his thin lips. “Nevertheless, to think a criminal would willingly throw himself upon my sword. Have you at last realized your sin, human?”

“You’re human too, aren’t you? What are you trying to say? I don’t get it.”

The Grim Reaper shook his head, as though disappointed. “Very well. In that case, allow me to instruct you. I will explain the nature of your misdeed.”

“Sorry, not interested.”

I kicked off the floor and closed in on the Grim Reaper—but even though I’d moved first, I could tell he was keeping flawless track of my actions. Most people got punched before they even saw me coming. It was probably way too dangerous for me to go straight at him without thinking then, huh...?

Nah, it was time to have some fun!

I aimed right at the Grim Reaper’s chest, never slowing for a second. Simultaneously, the Grim Reaper unsheathed his sword, and—in the same fluid motion—swung his blade.

I’d read about this too. It was a technique known as an *iai*, where you would draw your sword, cut down your opponent, and sheathe it in one perfect arc.

Me, I’d only ever fought against monsters before, so this was the first time I’d experienced something like that—a sword technique, and the fastest kind at that. Before I even realized I’d been sliced open, blood gushed from my chest. I tried to slug the Reaper and shrug off the wound, but he deftly dodged my swing. Judging from the speed of that *iai*, he was more agile than I was.

I dodged back to put some distance between us. The Grim Reaper glanced at his sword with a narrowed eye.

“Your body,” he said. “It’s frightfully tough.”

“Yep. Because I trained. Hey, I’m pretty shocked, too! To think there’s a swordsman out there who can cut my muscles.”

“What in the world is bewildering about that? When faced with the blade, living flesh becomes as paper. Such is the way of the world. Of course muscles would be cut easily, am I wrong?”

For some town normie, sure. But my body was much, much more durable than some lame stick of sharpened metal. Having great enough skill with a sword to cut my skin, though, now *that* was something genuinely worthy of praise.

“It is regrettable to end one as powerful as yourself. However, you are a criminal, and I must cut down your sins,” said the Grim Reaper in a detached voice, leveling the tip of his sword with my face.

“Sins, huh?”

He certainly did have an abnormal level of power, and that kind of person generally had abnormal thought processes, too.

“That’s right: sin. You and everyone else in this world are guilty of a grave iniquity. You have abandoned your duty.”

His hoarse voice sank deeper still. Wait...did that mean he was getting stronger? *Nice*. I continued to suppress the urge to burst out in smiles.

“Duty, huh? What kind of duty?”

“The duty to die.”

Duty to...die? Okay, now that didn’t make any sense. “Is that the reason you killed those ordinary townsfolk, ya weirdo?”

“Of course. I enabled them to fulfill their duty. By dying by my hand, those humans have come to realize the sin they’ve committed.”

All those elegant words, and I didn’t get him at all. His logic defied even me, an intellectual!

“I see. All right, then. Let’s go.”

Trying to figure out all his nonsense would just be a pain, so it was high time to get on with the punching. I lunged, entering within reach of his sword. The Grim Reaper’s blade was still out of his sheath, and he swung it at my left shoulder. I slid back and dodged.

In response, like a mirror image, he slid forward and slashed upward. I couldn’t dodge his speed, so I poured strength into my arms.

The sword swung straight into my forearms—and bounced off.



We both skipped back to get some distance from each other. I could see the astonishment in the Grim Reaper's sunken eyes. "Wha...? What in the world is with your body?"

"Uh, nothing? It's normal. I'm just swole."

I couldn't seem to hit him either, though. Considering his incredible dexterity with that sword, it was hard for me to get in close. Still, at least now I knew I could stop his blade if I got my timing right.

"I'm afraid I cannot die here," said the man. "I *will* not, not until I've helped you and the rest of humanity fulfill your duty."

Uuuugh, this again? I ignored his words and readied my stance. I couldn't get his line of thinking whatsoever, so what was the point in listening? I angled myself toward the Grim Reaper, gathered my focus, and threw a right-arm punch. My swing sent a shockwave that broke the sound barrier—one he slashed through with ease.

"Quite the bizarre technique. Do you have some kind of firearm?"

"Nah, that was my Pistol Punch."

"Your what...?"

"That technique. I call it the Pistol Punch."

"I...see. Well, I suppose you're free to give it whatever name you choose, no matter what it is..."

Huh? He looked at me with this odd pity in his eyes now. I didn't understand one bit. He let out a small sigh, and the pressure he was exerting lessened. However, at the distance we now stood at, that still didn't give me any openings to exploit. I'm sure he realized that.

Then, slowly, he began to speak again. "With your strength, surely you understand. No humans are immortal, none whatsoever. All things pass into the night. Death is the duty shared by all living things. Some human insects prattle on about 'the right to live,' but a *right* is not a *duty*. A right to life *must* be echoed by the duty to die. All I do is teach these criminals this sacred truth, which they, and even you, have failed to realize. Surely you see that I am not a monster but a preacher, an evangelist of truth, do you not?"

"Yeah, but, if we have the right to live, that doesn't mean you have to kill us right away, does it?"

"It is impossible to defer a debt so deep and true; you cannot

postpone your duty. Can there be any better way to live than to dream of what comes in death?”

Did my words not reach him or something? It was like we weren't even speaking the same language. This was too much; he was practically incoherent.

Except...

Something about this was tugging at my brain. Filia. Meeting her. I kind of got the feeling I was reborn, after that. Before she entered my world, I was satisfied with my narrow little life. I knew I was alive now, but maybe back then, I'd really been dead.

“Hey, Grim Reaper. Check this—I *used* to be dead. How do you like that?”

His face twisted. “Are you mad? Nonsense and blasphemy. I will have you fulfill your duty now.”

And here he came!

The pressure emanating from the Grim Reaper surged. Mouth shut tight, he closed the distance between us. I repelled his sword with my arm then started in with another punch. But just before my attack landed, I pulled back and latched onto his right arm—this time, I wasn't going to let him slip away.

Using my free hand, I punched him with all of my strength. He sputtered as the wind left his body and went flying through the air. His ability with a sword was incredible, but his body lacked *muscle*. Which was why he no longer had a right arm.

I tossed the arm aside and raced after him. I reached him while he was still in midair and he spat bloody vomit right into my eyes. Even now he could sense my location within a split second. He really was tremendously strong.

However, it's not like temporary blindness was a setback for me. Tracking his presence with my keen battle senses, I launched a punch into the darkness. My fist smashed bone with an awful crack.

I wiped the blood from my eyes onto my shirt, and blinked up, looking for what had come of the Grim Reaper. He'd collapsed against the far wall. A lake of blood pooled around the stump of his right shoulder. It looked like the upper and lower halves of his body had been near torn apart. Guess my follow-up punch hit his stomach.

Cautiously, I approached.

“Gah...I never imagined I’d lose. But, very well. That just means that...the time has come for me to fulfill my duty.” Blood spilled from the Reaper’s mouth with every word.

“I had fun, too. It’s been a while since I let loose like that.”

The longer the fight, the more excited I got and the stronger I became. It was rare for me to find an opponent that could last so long when my excitement level was so high. Fantastically satisfying.

“I have...a final request of you. It’s not unreasonable...” he whispered through the blood. “Would you...please take my life, using my sword?”

“Sure thing.” I went to fetch his sword from his right arm, which my toss had sent clear over to the other side of the room. I knew he was a criminal who’d killed innocents, but he was so damn *strong*. I had to respect that.

As I returned to the mortal remains of the Grim Reaper, sprawled on the dusty ground, I asked him a question. “Got any last words?”

“No, none. I haven’t fulfilled my mission, but somehow...I feel at peace.” He sputtered in hacking coughs. “You better hurry and die, too. I’m sure you’ll understand this feeling.”

The look on his face was sincerely peaceful. After losing all that blood, he didn’t seem to even be in pain.

“Sorry,” I said. “I just don’t get it.”

I plunged the sword deep into his chest. He let out one final breath, and then, finally, died.

I made sure to confirm he’d breathed his last before I left the abandoned building. The world outside was dim and the shadows were long. The sun was setting.

Upon seeing me emerge, Filia let out a shaking sigh of relief and rushed over to me. “Did you get him?”

I nodded. “He was crazy strong. It was *amazing*.”

“I see...” She didn’t look too excited. Had something happened?

“Hey, you look kinda down again, you okay?”

“No, that’s not it. It’s just, well...I was worried about you,” said

Filia, averting her eyes and hanging her head.

“Huh, what’s this? Filia’s cute side returns.”

“You’re damn right I’m cute! And—and if you died, Yuri, do you know how much cute, cute little old me would suffer for it? You’re my protector, Yuri, so I absolutely forbid you from dying, okay? You—you simply aren’t allowed!”

Filia, after one of her classic rounds of crocodile tears and fake-sobbing and faux-sniffing, put her hands together like she was praying and looked up at me with hopeful eyes.

Woof, she could really lay it on thick.

“I take back what I said earlier,” I mumbled.

Ignoring her cheery look, we made our way to the headquarters of Astarte’s knight order. It was time to report on the dutiful end of the Grim Reaper.

Chapter 8:

The Scent of Flowers Fills My Nose

WHEN FILIA AND I ARRIVED at the headquarters of the knight order, we found a redbrick structure that gave off the same impression of sincerity, fortitude, and vigor you'd expect from the knights themselves. As we approached the entrance, a knight by the door waved us down.

"Hello, there," he said, with a polite sort of formality. "This is the headquarters for Astarte's knight order. How may I help you?"

"I killed that Grim Reaper guy."

"Ahem. Do pardon me, you did what?"

"I killed that Grim Reaper guy."

"H-huh? I-I must alert my superiors, please wait here for a moment!" Stammering and tripping over himself, the knight rushed inside before turning, remembering to salute, and running back inside.

"He's sure flustered, huh?" I said.

"Well, considering your *unique* way of introducing yourself, I'd say it's perfectly natural for him to be a little thrown."

"Okay, but I read that if you keep your messages brief and to the point, it's easier for people to understand you."

"Bluntness has limits."

Limits, huh? Should I just blather on, then? Ugh, but I hated making small talk or getting bogged down with details.

Shortly thereafter, we were brought inside and led to a small room. There, the knights asked us to describe the situation then left us alone for a bit. About ten minutes later, one of the knights came back into the room. He was tall with brown hair, clad in that same white knight uniform, and he exuded an air of calm dignity. He had a handsome face, even a beautiful one, and it was easy to tell he was popular even within the knight order.

He was a far cry from burly or huge, but I could tell he had trained well. The guy was *built*. Naturally, I liked him at once, and my

opinion rose by the minute. People who train their body can't be bad guys, you know?

"I apologize for the wait. We discovered the Grim Reaper's corpse inside that abandoned building, just as you said."

"Well, yeah."

"Yuri," Filia hissed. "The person we're speaking with is the embodiment of the power of the state, so you should really mind what you say a little more! *Ahem!* I'm terribly sorry if my companion has caused you any trouble whatsoever." She bowed her head to the man repeatedly.

Well, actually, I think it's even ruder to snap at somebody while you're right in front of a Power of the State guy or whatever, but what was I able to do about that? Anyway, the man didn't show any signs of minding either of our behavior, and he shook his head a little, smiling gently at Filia.

"Oh, no, no, please, there's no need to be so humble; I'd be happiest if you spoke casually around me. If I had to be stiff and formal all the time, even around people who aren't knights such as yourselves, I feel like I wouldn't have any time to be a real human, so to speak."

"I see. I don't really get it, but that sounds tough."

"Ah ha ha, thank you for your sympathy, good sir." The man let out a sigh, and after he changed his posture a bit to get comfortable, he bowed his head and spoke again: "I apologize for the late introduction. My name is Gauche Moratrim. I serve as the deputy commander of the knight order of the kingdom of man. I could not be more grateful for what you have done for us in solving this case. Truly, thank you."

I mean, half the reason I did it was because I just wanted to fight, but gratitude's always nice.

"And may I ask your names in turn?"

"I'm Yuri."

"I am known as Filia."

"Sir Yuri and Lady Filia, then. I will remember that," said Gauche, smiling. Perhaps it was simply a polite business-like smile anyone would wear in these situations, but it *seemed* genuine, at least. If anything, he could act, unlike certain others I knew.

“To be honest, the best outcome likely would have been if we had managed to capture this Reaper fellow, but, well, so it goes. As I’m sure you’re aware, all manner of people are free to pass through the borders of this country as they please. However, this also brings us countless criminals of unknown origin, and we knights—the very shield of the people!—have been at something of a loss to contain them all. In fact, we’ve been pathetically incapable.” Gauche ground his teeth, looking deeply frustrated by the whole situation.

“Huh, hold on a sec. Could I be charged with a crime or something?” I blurted out, the words just spilling out of my mouth.

I’d been so absorbed in fighting that I’d forgotten about the whole “murdering a person is illegal” thing, even if the guy was a criminal. This really wasn’t like monster-hunting at all, yeesh.

But Gauche shook his head. “No, you will not be charged. Dealing out justice to brutally violent criminals is ‘a matter of life and death,’ after all. The knight order hadn’t yet caught the Grim Reaper, and we were beginning to fear we wouldn’t before he took even more victims. Charging you? No, we’re *grateful* to you.”

Seemed like my worries were just needless anxiety on my part, then. Nevertheless, a sense of relief washed over me. Congratulations to myself on not currently being arrested!

“More importantly, what say you to joining the knight order, Sir Yuri? Someone of your ability would be able to live quite a comfortable life in our ranks.” Gauche leaned forward as he made his proposal.

The knight order, huh...? Hmm.

“Sorry, but I’m gonna have to turn you down. I’m not too keen on being bound to an organization, and acting for the sake of other people isn’t really in my nature either,” I admitted.

“Oh dear, what a dreadfully selfish person our Yuri is!” teased Filia.

“Oh, shut it.” *Watch yourself in front of the Power of the State* my muscular butt, Filia.

Gauche, on understanding that I had no interest in his offer whatsoever, switched targets and turned from me to Filia.

“How about you, Lady Filia? Pardon my rudeness, but it looks to me that you possess a substantial amount of magical energy. Ah,

perhaps you don't know! You see, in this country, there is no problem with an elf serving with the knight order. We employ all comers. And though we are called 'knights,' not everyone in our company uses a sword."

"My apologies. I'm afraid I cannot join your knight order, either. I've decided to accompany Yuri."

"I see. That's too bad." Having been turned down by both of us, Gauche deflated. I could feel this aura hanging over him, one that was all tragic, brave, and maybe...sad?

"Are you really that short on manpower?"

"Oh, we have the men. It's the power we lack. Our forces pale in comparison to you two... At any rate, the matter of the Grim Reaper is resolved. It's time to return to the royal capital."

I didn't really understand everything he said, but yikes, he seemed to be having a pretty crappy day.

"Good work out there, though," Filia piped up. "Thank you for everything you do for the people."

"It is nothing but my knightly duty. And please, don't thank me. I am the one who is grateful to you, in this case. I hope we might meet again."

After a few last questions about our encounter with the Grim Reaper, Gauche parted ways with us and Filia and I made our way back to the inn.

On the now familiar road to our temporary home, Filia abruptly broke the silence. "Your nose really is amazingly handy, Yuri."

"What? That was out of the blue."

"Which leads me to a question: can you, by any chance, detect *my* scent?"

"Well, yeah, we've been together for a while now."

Somehow we really had been, huh? The second I was asked, I could easily summon her precise smell to mind.

Filia simply said, "I see," and put her hands behind her back. Paused. "What kind of smell do I have?"

"Huh? You want to know your own smell? Filia, do you have some kind of fetish?"

“Excuse me, what kind of fetish are you talking about? No, it’s just that we elves really don’t have any body odor. That’s why we don’t really know what we smell like. I *simply* wanted to *learn* about something I don’t *understand*. Is that so wrong, you bloodhound?” She sniffed. “But it’s fine! Fine, I say! I don’t even care anymore,” she added, and whirled around to face away.

It seemed I’d made her angry again.

“Well, let’s see,” I muttered. “It’s certainly true that compared to humans, your scent is much fainter, Filia. Ah, you don’t use any kind of perfume or anything, right?”

“Elves aren’t about dealing with strong, pungent odors, so we have no need for such trifles.”

Even though Filia was pouting, she still answered my question. Okay, things between us weren’t the *worst* they’d ever been. I continued.

“You have a scent that’s like, um...well, flowers. I haven’t ever picked up the scent of other elves before, so I didn’t know if that’s a characteristic that applies to all of you... But I think it’s nice. I like your scent, Filia.”

“Huh? Bu—hnngh—ha—um, I-I see...” She coughed loudly. “Yes, I, uhhnnn, see.” Another fit of loud, red-faced coughing.

I wasn’t going to call her out on the fact that she was stammering up a storm. Or on her forced coughing, either. I am, after all, a very gentle man. A gentle gentleman, if you will. In any case, it seemed she was in a better mood now, so that was good.

“I didn’t *stammer*.”

“You’re right. You didn’t stammer, Filia. So please stop glaring at me.”

I didn’t know what else to do, staring at that beet red face of hers.

“I *didn’t* stammer.”

“Yep, yep. I get it. I get it, okay?”

“I didn’t stammer.”

“Huh? Did you even hear what I said? I said I get it.”

“I *didn’t* stammer, okay?”

“Yeah, you didn’t. You didn’t, so let’s just go back to normal now!”

“Oh gods I did stammer! I really did stammer and had the audacity, the grim and vile gall, to lie to you about it! Please don’t look away from the enormity of my sin!”

Agh, she was way too emotionally unstable! Why was she getting mad at me? I really didn’t have much experience at all dealing with people, so I had absolutely no idea what I should do at times like these. Praise? Compliments seemed to work a charm.

“Yes, you did stammer, but it’s fine, isn’t it? It was cute! Because *you’re* cute!”

“Aha! You think thoughtless praise will placate me? Do you think I’m but a child freshly weaned, you—you beefy boob?” She stared at me with narrowed eyes. Filia was unexpectedly sharp, huh. Maybe she’d read my mind again?

Whoo boy. Sometimes you just gotta cut your losses.

“Well, let’s head on back.”

“Oh, Yuri, don’t leave me behind. Is that how you’d treat a child?”

“Shut it.”

“Ah, the slings and arrows of an outrageous knucklehead! So cruel!”

Multiply that by an entire walk home.

It was a holiday, so for the first time in several days, we didn’t take any requests. It wasn’t just because Filia didn’t want to do anything, either. No, I also thought holidays were necessary. After all, if we took requests all the time, I wouldn’t have any free time to train. To hone my body to withstand actual battle, I needed to exercise daily discipline and work out regularly. A day off requests and a day *on* the path to Absolute Muscle.

“Yuri, do you really know what a holiday is? It is a day of *rest*. A day to reeeest,” said Filia, wearing her outfit—the white dress with a pink vest. It seemed she’d really taken a liking to it, huh? I’d picked it

out, too, so... But then again, she always wore the same thing all the time anyway.

"It's not like I'm planning on abusing my body so much that I won't be able to rest or anything. Besides, if I don't move around, I won't be able to sleep at night," I told her.

"Didn't you just have a life-or-death battle yesterday? If I were you, I wouldn't want to move even a single muscle after that."

"Wow, you really are feeble, huh, Filia?"

"Nope, you're just way too tough, Yuri. I think your body must not be quite human after all," said Filia, watching in complete awe as I got into the "one-pinky push-up" phase of my daily routine.

"Hm, this is still way too easy. Hey Filia, hop on my back."

"Huh? I suppose it's no trouble, but...well, I am fairly heavy, all right?" she said hesitantly.

Heavy? Great! "Oh no, heavy is better. Great for training."

"The master of muscles, terrible of tact." Filia shook her head, a resigned look in her eyes. "So, what, do I just hop on?"

As she clambered up onto my back, I could feel the sensation of her warm skin brushing up against mine. And so I started up my pinky-finger push-ups again while Filia rode on my back. But something was off.

"Filia." I tilted my head, a little confused. "Aren't you way too light?"

"R-really, you think?"

For some reason, Filia's voice went higher, like she was happy about something.

"Yeah. With such little extra weight, you're no good for my muscle training. We might have to fatten you up if you're going to be a help with this."

"I absolutely refuse!"

And now she was angry? Elves, man.

"This isn't just about understanding elves! For crying out loud, Yuri, do you have any comprehension whatsoever of delicacy?"

"Delicacies?"

“No, delicacy!”

“Oh, I don’t want to hear *that* from someone who freely peeks into other people’s minds.”

“I don’t use it on anyone but you, Yuri. Does that make you happy?” she teased.

I wasn’t going to play this game, nope.

“I *am* delicate, you know.” She sounded thoughtful suddenly. “I’ve had to be. People don’t really want to associate with me when they know I have Telepathy. That’s normal, I suppose. You know, back when I lived in the elf village, no one would approach me. Even though if someone decides they don’t want me to see into their mind, I simply can’t!” She looked down at me, saucer-eyes watering, and burst into tears. “I was such a lonely, lonely child!”

Her tears felt forced, but...it wasn’t all fake. She did sound down. The fundamental story here was likely true.

“Yeah, well, you know. Anyone who’s even a little different gets ostracized, right? Maybe it’s because I’m so single-mindedly devoted to getting stronger and rarely think about anything else, but I’ve been alone for a long time. I’ve never had any friends. Never had a girlfriend, either.”

As Filia listened to me, she dropped her whole crying act. “Why, Yuri...are you trying to console me, by any chance?”

“Nah, just talking to myself.”

“We’re not so different, you and I, are we?” Filia cooed, beaming her way into a little laugh (“hee hee!”) and sounding delighted with herself.

“Maybe you’re right. I don’t think I’ve ever felt lonely though,” I said.

At that, I stopped doing my push-ups and let Filia get off my back.

“Why’s that?” she asked. “Normally anyone would feel lonely in that situation, right?”

“I got a friend in me. A bunch of ’em, honestly: these muscles.”

I gazed lovingly upon the rock-hard mountains of my bod. Beautiful as ever. When light hit my body, which was covered in a light sheen of sweat, it glittered and sparkled like morning dew. Just

mesmerizing...

Filia coughed, shaking me out of it. "Are you...sick?"

"My impeccable health is a point of pride."

"No, not physically. The *brain* part."

"No, impossible. I am an intellectual, after all."

"I see," she said with a long, despairing sigh. "Alas, it's too late. I take back what I said earlier about us being alike."

Our restful holiday drew on as we chattered away.

Once Filia was asleep, I continued training by standing on one leg, on my tiptoes, and doing an air chair balance exercise. You might think it a bit plain or dull, but this kind of steady, straightforward training was how I maintained such beautiful, supple, and powerful muscles. I spent the night training this way while dreaming of fighting all kinds of new, mysterious, and powerful opponents.

"Hey, hey, Filia! Get up!"

It was first thing in the morning. I shook Filia from her sound sleep in bed.

"Uuugh? Why in heaven's name are you shaking me so early in the morning?" said Filia in a lethargic voice. She rubbed her eyes, heavy with sleep.

"Big news! They opened up Muscle Land! Hurry, let's go!"

"Has the sun even risen yet? Just what time is it?"

"I'm not lyin' about this! Look, I got a flyer!"

Still bouncing all over the walls with excitement, I showed Filia the flyer that had been slipped under our door. On the flyer, the words "Muscle Land, Now Open!" were written in large letters.

"And you don't find this handwriting remotely suspicious, Yuri?"

"Pfft. Suspicious? It's Muscle Land, Filia! Muscle. *Land*. No one who trains their muscles can be bad!"

Sure, the flyer was handwritten rather than typed, and yeah, the

handwriting was rough and sloppy, like it was just haphazardly scribbled onto the paper. So what?

Muscle Land. Two perfect words together at last, like linguistic peanut butter and jelly. Was there any other combination of words that could possibly make my heart soar with excitement like those two? The Muscle God up in heaven must've been smiling at me, because (I don't know if you know this) I'm someone who trains his muscles every single day! I couldn't wait any longer, so I hurried Filia along, dragging her by the arm.

"Come on, let's hurry up and go! Let's go, Filia!"

"All right, all right, I'll come along. I'm worried about this, though, and I *do* suggest that we..."

Yeah, yeah, whatever. Muscle Land! MUSCLE LAND.

An hour later, Filia and I made our way side by side through the town of Astarte. The sights I could see! The conversations I could hear! The scents of the city! Right now, for me, everything glittered.

"I'm so exciiiiiiiiiteeeeeeeed, Filia!" I said, a spring in my step. But Filia just looked depressed.

"I'm sure you're going to have fun, but I really don't know what manner of clientele we should expect to encounter at this, ah... This 'Muscle Land.' Do you really think—and please take a moment to contemplate this—literally anyone in the entire world would want to go to a place called Muscle Land? Anyone whatsoever? Again, take your time."

"Um, *yeah*, definitely."

"I..." Filia bit her tongue. "...disagree," she said finally. "I can't help but feel like there's something going on, some kind of trick. Even if there *is* a Muscle Land and everything on the flyer is true, this whole situation makes me nervous."

"What do you mean, you'd feel nervous even if the flyer is true?"

If it were true, then any and everyone in the world would be over the Muscle Moon. What could be wrong with that?

"It's not really like a theme park with a 'muscle' theme has a particularly large niche market, right?"

Ridiculous! Besides, even if Muscle Land wasn't a *huge* hit, there

was no way it would be *unpopular*. Eh, what was the use of worrying? We were going to see it ourselves! Ah, I couldn't believe it!

Once we followed the directions on the flyer, we arrived at a small plot of land on the outskirts of Astarte. From the outside, we couldn't see anything that could be considered amusement park equipment. Honestly, it looked like a vacant lot with no foot traffic at all. The surrounding area was really quiet, like a ghost town.

"Is...this the place?" I asked.

"So it really was a lie, after all..." sighed Filia.

"No, look closer."

Filia obviously still had her doubts, so I showed her what we were really looking at. I pointed over to some figures standing at the far end of the vacant lot. It was a group of about ten men, some real rough-looking fellas, standing around and beckoning us to come over with broad smirks on their faces.

"That's gotta be the welcoming committee. Check it out, they have such gentle eyes."

"Sure, gentle as wolves."

Filia could be so untrusting! I didn't know why she wanted to deny the existence of Muscle Land, but I wasn't impressed by this arbitrary skepticism of hers. Before I entered the vacant lot, I released my muscles.

"Oh thank the gods, you're taking this seriously now," said Filia. "I suppose a group of ten is nothing. We can certainly take them down."

"Take them d—? Filia, this is Muscle Land! Muscle! Land! Where you unleash your muscles? I'm not 'taking anybody down,' this is just common sense!"

"In what country would that be considered common sense, exactly?"

"All of 'em."

As the welcome committee saw me release my muscles, they started looking nervous. Hm? Okay, but why? Unless—oh, my muscles were just a little too splendid.

Admittedly, these guys did look a bit weak. No other way to put it, really. It was understandable that they'd end up feeling inferior. But

they didn't need to worry about that in Muscle Land! Sure, in my heart of hearts I would've liked to see bulkier employees—would've made me super happy, in fact—but these skinny lil' guys were trying to create an earthly paradise called Muscle Land. That alone was something to be proud of.

My heart overflowed with the desire to bless them for their wonderful achievement. I took one step closer to the vacant lot that served as the holy site for Muscle Land. And another step. Another. Oh, whoops, I'd almost forgot, I had to give them a proper greeting.

"Muscle Mmmmmmmusc! Come on, Filia, you too!"

"M-me too? M-Muscle Mmmmmmmusc!"

Filia and I crowed a greeting as we approached, step by step, toward the ten-man welcoming committee.

"We came here because we saw the flyer. So...what do we *do* here at Muscle Land?" I asked the men, holding up the piece of paper.

Suddenly, one of them erupted into laughter as if he couldn't bear it anymore.

"Pfftt. Ha ha, ah ha ha ha ha ha! This guy seriously believed it!"

Believed...what? While I stood there confused, the men started talking all on top of each other, as if a dam had burst and they all had something to say.

"There is no Muscle Land! As if we'd actually do somethin' like that. We're all here to beat you senseless!"

"Man, we knew you loved muscles and all from our investigations, but seriously, to come all the way here without findin' any of it fishy? Talk about a naïve moron!"

"Still though, how could someone fall for a trap like this? This guy was even like 'Muscle Muscle,' I mean, come on, right? What *is* that, even? Ehhh he he he he, this is the best joke ever!"

"You mean, you..." I swallowed. "You deceived me...?"

They just laughed louder.

Oh. So...Muscle Land really was just a lie, then?

Filia, lips quivering, turned away from me...and started laying into the men with all the fury of a warrior goddess. "You wretched—why would you—Yuri, he—Yuri believed your awful little lies for no

reason at all, even though it was the kind of a lie a child could've easily seen through! He was looking forward to your mean, horrid, stupid little trick like a complete idiot!"

Points for...effort, I guess? Thanks?

"Seriously," one of the guys snarled, "how weird is it that a muscle-bound freak like you is hanging around with a beauty like her? Stupid and weird, don't you think? Social standing, my guy. We're gonna teach it to you, punch by punch."

"Yeah, man, we're residents of Surama. We're nothing like those half-wit adventurers. We're gonna beat every inch of ya blue."

So they didn't like that I was partners with Filia? Why be so indirect about it? Why taunt me with the fantasy of that golden dream, Muscle Land...

"Unforgivable," I whispered. "Your actions are *unforgivable*." I glared at the men. They looked to be afraid for a moment, but not *that* afraid. I'm guessing because they had the advantage of numbers.

"All right, all of y'all in hiding. Let's get him!"

As one, the men rushed me and Filia.

"Filia," I said. "Get away from here."

"O-okay!"

As she withdrew, I contracted my muscles back down. When the men saw me shrink, one of them burst out laughing.

"Ha! What's the matter, scared?"

"Scared? No. You just don't deserve these muscles."

I had absolutely no intention of letting people like this, who would use muscle as a pretext for their cruelty, savor the exquisite beauty of my muscles. Anyway, time for punching.

"Yahhhh!"

"Nah?!"

I got around behind one and struck him at the base of the neck.

"Hooah!"

"He's so fast!"

The next guys, I slammed into with elbow strikes. One after the

other, they fell like flies to the lightest of flicks.

“Hooah!”

“Gahh?!”

“Wh-what is with this guy? He’s like a monster...!”

Muscle Land, huh? More like Scrawny Town. I let out a deep sigh in the muscley lungs of my mind. Even with my real power sealed away, I completely decimated every single one of these little turdmunches. It wasn’t even a close match.

“I can’t believe it was a lie...” I lamented, standing in the center of the so-called battlefield, the ex-welcoming committee sprawled in the dirt all around me.

It had been a long, long time since I’d endured a shock to the heart like this. And here I thought I could finally share the splendor of muscles with people who really got it...

“I-It really is a shame...” said Filia as she approached, trying to cheer me up.

Yeah, she was right. It was no good letting these mean little nugget-men get me down.

“All right,” I said, nodding. “Ugh, but if we just head back home now, that’ll be a waste of a day, right? Hey, you know what, how about I do some muscle training with you guys? I’ll teach you just how wonderful muscles are. We’ll start with abs!”

At my signal, Filia summoned cold water using her water magic and splashed the men’s faces. But after hearing my new plans for them, these pranksters all complained!

“D-don’t screw with us. Like anyone would wanna do that!”

Then they made the mistake of trying to escape.

“Oh, do you *really* think you can get out of this?”

I darted in front of the men and pulverized a large, conveniently placed boulder. At that, they dragged their feet back to where they’d started without another word.

“Oh, so *that* gave you some motivation, eh? I’m so glad!”

“P-please save us!”

The men looked over at Filia with terrified expressions. However,

Filia simply shot back a cold, cold glare.

“You reap what you sow.” She flashed an icicle smile. “Please do your absolute best.”

“Aw, don’t talk like that, Filia!” I said. “You’re going to join us, too, right? It’ll be a lot more fun if we’re all in this together.”

Besides, if I made Filia sit out on something fun like an all-day muscle training session, it’d be like I was torturing her! I couldn’t do that. Filia and I were partners, after all.

“Ahh, hmm, sorry, I suddenly started feeling sick to my stomach. Apologies, Yuri, I’d absolutely love to, but I’m afraid I simply cannot participate in such a state. Please go ahead,” said Filia, clutching her torso.

“No, no, that’s perfect. Training is an incredibly effective way to deal with abdominal pain. Up you get.”

“Huh? Wh-why?! How could a workout have that kind of effect?”

“Muscles are swollen with infinite possibility! Besides, you’re finally being proactive about training, Filia. I don’t want that feeling to go to waste.”

“H-has my escape route been blocked?”

Escape route? What was she talking about?

“All right, let’s do it, Filia! And you guys, too!”

“O-okay...”

Following my lead, the whole group worked up a sweat all day until late into the night. Ah, muscle training in my impromptu Muscle Land really was wonderful, in the end!

The next morning, Filia woke with the same laid-back, easygoing look she always had as she first started to regain consciousness.

“Mmm... Ah, Yuri?”

“Good morning, Filia.”

“Good morning... Eeeeeaaaaah?” Suddenly, her body started trembling in the bed, shaking all over. “Y-Yuri.”

“Eh? What’s wrong?”

“There’s n-nothing I can do. I-I think I might die.”

“Hey, c’mon, what are you talking about?” I asked, frowning.

“My whole body, all of my muscles hurt. I c-can’t move at all.”

Her muscles hurt? Surely not because of the muscle training yesterday! The stuff we’d done in the abandoned lot had basically just been breathing, right?

“It’s all right, there’s nothing for you to worry about,” I assured her. “Besides, I know some more routines that’re perfect for dealing with this level of pain.”

“Oh great, yay, there’s that, too! I...*appreciate* your offer, but I really, truly can’t move a single joint on a single finger right now, so I’m afraid I’ll have to pass,” said Filia. “Actually, could you please move my hand so it’s on top of my chest? If you do that, I’ll be able to use recovery magic.”

Huh, so she could use recovery magic to cure her aching muscles, huh? That’s some all-purpose magic there!

“Gotcha.” I took hold of Filia’s trembling hand and her slender arm twitched in response.

“Ow, ow, ow! B-be a little gentler, Yuri!”

“It’s hard, though. Your arm’s so delicate, I don’t wanna crush it by accident...”

“Wh-wha? P-please don’t say such terrifying things!”

Hmph. Whether or not I said it out loud didn’t change how hard it was.

At any rate, despite the slight disturbance to our morning, Filia’s muscle pain subsided once she got to use her magic, so we made our way back to the guild. After taking on yet another request to gather medicinal herbs, we set out on our usual route into the woods. That passed the day more or less without incident, and we made our usual report to the guild.

“All right. Excellent job. That’s precisely the right variety and amount of herbs for this request.”

As always, we received our reward and got ready to leave the guild, but as we did, a man called out to us, stopping us in our tracks.

“Hey, wait!”

We turned to see who was calling us, and there stood a rather frail, slender man.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“You? I don’t want anything from you! I’m talking to the elf!” The man’s voice went shrill. Maybe he was excited or something?

“What is it?” asked Filia, already sounding tired.

“Would you join our team? Our goal is to become a super seriously serious S-Rank party. You’re an elf, so we’d love for you to come aboard.”

“How interesting,” said Filia vaguely.

The man gave a curtain-call smile. Another person trying to poach Filia for their party, huh? That was happening a lot lately. Not that I didn’t understand, though. She was so cute and capable that it was only natural.

But why weren’t they calling *me*? Wait till they got a load of these muscles! Or was everyone’s eyesight tragically bad? Ah, sorry—got a little off topic there. Back to Filia.

I didn’t want to part ways with her—she could use recovery magic, you know? And since we’d become partners that could really communicate, being together wasn’t ever bad, even when we got into our tiffs. But then again, the decision wasn’t mine to make.

“If you stick with a man like that, some beefy inhuman master of muscle, you won’t have any future. Team up with us. We’re on that express train to the S-Rank! What does S stand for? Seriously. We’re taking it all super seriously serious!”

“A brokirin,” said Filia. “Suppose you ran into one. Could your team take it down in an instant?”

The man made a ghastly exaggerated reaction of surprise.

“Hey, come on, now, don’t mess around. That’s a B-Rank monster, you know? We ain’t ever fought one before. I mean, not *yet*. We could probably take one down in about thirty minutes or so. But with *you*,” he added quickly, “we could do an instant. Less than instant, even! Super seriously serious!”

Super...seriously serious? Did he just like the sound of it? I mulled it over while waiting for Filia’s answer. It didn’t take long.

Filia opened her mouth and spoke in one, flat, breathless sentence, as if she’d made up her mind from the very beginning. “I see, it all

sounds *very* serious, but I refuse.”

With a short, polite bow, Filia turned to leave once again.

“H-hey, hey, wait! Just like that? C’mon!” the man rambled, flustered.

Filia looked back at him, smiling broadly. “With all due respect, my companion, Yuri, *can* kill a brokirin in an instant. If I’m on a team with him, I would call that a far brighter future than whatever boring role in your trite party of adventurers you’re yearning to plug me into. Good day.”

With that, she took my hand and led me out of the guild, her footsteps heavy and fast.

The man yelled from behind us: “Yeah right, as if an E-Rank adventurer could pull off something like that! Dirty liars!”

“I’m dreadfully sorry for any trouble I’ve caused you, Yuri,” said Filia rather suddenly, just as we were about to arrive at the inn. Maybe Filia felt somehow responsible for all the invitations she’d been receiving lately.

“Aw, c’mon, nobody’s gonna blame you for a bunch of pushy creeps—or nobody *should* anyway.”

“You might be right, but...”

“But there’s no way you’re gonna end up with anybody else. Not while you’re all dazzled by my rippling muscles, eh?”

“I am absolutely not, and I am terribly offended at the very idea.”

“Liar.”

“I shall make a traditional Elf-Promise that, from the bottom of my heart, that is not the case.”

Jabbing back and forth like that, we paused for a second and broke out laughing. When we arrived at the inn, I practically jumped into the chair and fell limp.

“Aaah!”

“‘Aaah’? Is something the matter?”

“Why doesn’t anyone understand the beauty of muscles?” I lamented.

No matter what anyone said, muscle was muscle, and muscle was precious. I didn't want to discard such thoughts. But so many people treated muscles like they were totally unnecessary. It was like nobody thought it was worth it to build them up beyond the bare minimum.

It made me sad. *Very* sad, goddamn it.

"That's..." Filia paused, frowned, picking her words carefully. "I suppose it's because we've got magic. People think they can make their bodies just as strong with magic as they could with training. Now, I did also hear stories from the village chief that a few people specifically train their bodies, like swordsmen who lack a sufficient quantity of magical energy. With muscle training, they compensate for deficiencies in their strength-enhancing magic. Though I really don't think there's anyone out there who trains *quite* as much as you do, Yuri."

"Huh, swordsmen? I see!"

Come to think of it, that Grim Reaper fellow had a pretty well-trained body, didn't he? He'd been sickly thin, but the quality of his muscles had been on a completely different level from the adventurers around here. Were there any other swordsmen at his level? Perhaps so.

I hoped so.

Filia continued: "But adventurers who lack magical aptitude are generally seen as beneath the ones who qualify as magicians. Magicians can use both magic and physical attacks, after all. Still, you do occasionally have your physical specialists like that Grim Reaper fellow."

"Hrm. I see."

When I thought about all those adventurers who couldn't do magic, it really bummed me out. Now was the golden age of the magician, and all the adventurers who couldn't stand among their ranks were being left in the dust.

Chapter 9: “The City of Valor” Mussen Morgeth

“CONGRATULATIONS, you’ve been promoted to Rank D! Please continue to nurture your valor.”

Several days had passed since my fight with the Grim Reaper, and now at long last we were D-Rank adventurers. To start I was happy we could finally take on monster-hunting requests!

“How about this one? The komiyoni?”

“Pass. Find me something stronger.”

“It’s a D-Rank request, hence it’s a D-Rank monster.”

But soon we’d taken several such requests, and so far, the D-Rank monsters just weren’t a match for me. I was always stoked to face a new opponent, but these D-Rank shmoees inevitably fell short of my matches with the brokirin and the Grim Reaper. Simply put, the D-Rank monsters bored me to tears. I wanted to fight a monster

that got my blood flowing and my muscles flexing. This half-hearted training wasn’t making me any stronger, and I was getting kind of frustrated.

“Aren’t there any more brokirins around?”

“If another one of those fiends just happened to thoughtlessly wander by, Astarte would be gone in the blink of an eye!”

“I’m here, though, so no, it wouldn’t. Bring it on, brokirins!”

Filia sighed and put her hand on her hip. I’d seen the adventurers in the guild make a similar gesture—*ahh*, and then a deep sigh. Maybe they were captivated by Filia. I understood the feeling. With that slim hand on her hip and a worried look on her face, Filia certainly did look lovely.

“If only she had a decent personality to go with it...”

“I can hear you,” she replied, puffing out her cheeks. It didn’t look like she was seriously mad, though. After spending the last few weeks together, I could tell the difference. Speaking of the last few weeks, or rather the last few days, I had an idea.

“Hey, Filia?”

“What is it?”

“Shoot me with magic again!”

Filia got flustered and rushed to cover my mouth with her hand. Surreptitiously, she glanced around the guild’s main room.

“Whad?” I asked her with a raise of my eyebrows.

“I already did that for you once, didn’t I? I’m not doing it again.”

“Whad? (What?) Id wuz phun do righd? (It was fun though right?)”

A few days prior, I’d asked Filia to hit me with magic and it had proved a pretty decent spot of training. I figured her abilities probably ranked *just* below A-level. There was hardly anyone equal to her, what with her advanced power in all four types of elemental magic: fire, water, lightning, and wind. When she hit me, she didn’t even seem like she was trying her hardest.

She’d been like “Noo, it’s really dangerous, I can’t go all out!” but that just made me all the more curious. Unfortunately, I lost my chance when, in the middle of training, I got a bit excited and said, “More... Come at me more!” That kinda put Filia off the whole project. Major bummer.

Please, oh please, all I wanted was for her to attack me again, and this time with her real power! If she’d only play her trump card!

“Fun for you, maybe! But now there’s a creepy rumor going around and it’s all your fault! They’re saying all kinds of stuff like, ‘Oh, that beautiful elf? She gets off on blasting her partner with magic, must be a huge pervert.’”

“You’re not?”

“Of course I’m not! And it wouldn’t matter if I was, because I’m *not* doing that anymore.”

Well, if she was going to draw that hard of a line, I was out of luck. It was another round of ho-hum D-Rank requests for us.

“Augh, everything is so *boring*!” I shouted, releasing every last one of my bottled-up agonies.

Ten days—ten whole days—of nothing but mind-numbing D-Rank requests, day after day. As the money piled up, so did my frustration.

“According to what I’ve heard, Yuri, the area around Astarte is supposed to be quite safe—excluding the Forest of Death, of course. It seems that by and large, nothing as dangerous as a brokirin appears except for maybe once a year or so.”

I was floored. Where did she learn that? “What?! When did you hear that? Why didn’t you tell me? I’ve been waiting and waiting for another brokirin to show up for *ten days*, Filia! Ten! Days!”

“If I told you I knew you’d say something like, ‘This town’s boring. Let’s go to the next one,’ or some such,” she said, lowering her voice to...imitate me? Hmm. Didn’t suit her. “But it seems you’re just about at your limit, so there you go. I’ve told you.”

“Then let’s go to the next town, Filia!”

She sighed heavily. “Of course. I’ll accompany you.”

“Really? To be honest, I thought you’d be more reluctant.”

“What’s the point? You’re incorrigible. Anyway, I *did* decide to follow you, Yuri.”

With that figured, the rest came quickly. We got the receptionist to help us research what city would be the most exciting for our next venture and identified several candidates. Out of all of them, I kept coming back to a city known as Mussen Morgeth.

Before we left, we decided to say goodbye to Sharon and her monster pseudog, Cocoa. Even though we’d only met once, when we told Sharon we were leaving she started bawling. I guess she’d really taken a liking to Filia. Me, though, she more or less ignored. Probably on account of my overwhelming appearance.

On our way out of Astarte, we just happened to bump into Babandongas, too, and we let him know we were leaving.

“Well, I’m an adventurer like you two,” he said. “I’m sure we’ll meet again!”

He had a point. Underneath that ridiculous hairstyle was a smart guy who said all kinds of right things.

“Well, we’re finally ready to depart, but how are we going to get to this Mussen Morgeth? Do we have a ride?” asked Filia.

Maybe it was because I’d been talking and talking about how excited I was to get the heck out of Astarte, but Filia didn’t know anything except for the fact that we were going to this Mussen Morgeth place. This was my responsibility, then. I scooped up Filia’s delicate body, slinging her over so her abdomen was resting on my shoulder.

“Um, *excuse me*? What in heaven’s name are you doing?” asked Filia from atop my shoulder.

“You asked if we have a ride, right? Well, allow me to answer that: we do. It’s me.”

“I’m going to...*excuse me*?”

“From the sound of it, Mussen Morgeth is about seventy miles west of here. If I run, we’ll get there in a couple hours.”

Filia squirmed, adjusting her posture to look at my face. “Did you just say *run*? You’re thinking of *running* there?”

“Yep. Fastest way, isn’t it?”

“He’s insane,” Filia muttered from by my ear—clearly she knew I could hear. “Just, absolutely mad.”

In any case, we took off for Mussen Morgeth.

“Please wait, Yuri! There’s no end to them!” shouted Filia in a panic. She was at her wit’s end, but I just crowed with laughter.

“Come on, ain’t that a good thing? Live in the moment!”

Right when Mussen Morgeth came into view, we ran straight into a fight with a swarm of monsters. There were two kinds of ’em locked in a struggle—one on two legs with scales and another on four with wings—and we crashed into them like an avalanche. With us in the fray it was a three-way battle royale and the whole thing devolved into utter chaos.

Now in the thick of it, Filia burnt a monster to a crisp using her

fire magic.

“Can’t you use something more powerful than those weak baby spells?” I asked mid-punch.

We’d whittled down the fifty-ish monsters to around thirty, but we couldn’t let our guard down yet.

“My magical energy’s exhausted, so no, Yuri, I can’t use big flashy spells. Besides, taking time to cast a powerful spell leaves me wide open to attack,” Filia snapped, blasting another monster with wind magic.

“I see. Well then, I’ll just take care of ’em all in one go!” I fired off a Pistol Punch and exploded several monsters in a straight line.

“That looked more magical than my own spells,” mused Filia.

“Muscle magic is pure magic. Anyone can do it if they train! You can even do it with kicks!” I kicked the air. The force of my strike broke the sound barrier and created a shockwave, exploding a few more monsters as it traveled.

“That looked even more powerful than your punch...”

“In terms of power, the Pistol Kick is certainly stronger than the Pistol Punch, but it’s harder to aim. And like with those big spells of yours, it leaves me wide open. I’m not proud to admit this, but it’s a technique I can only use on weaker opponents.”

Under her breath, Filia muttered, “Pistol Kick...” She had to be reeling over how cool the name was.

If I could only master my Pistol Kick, I might be able to take the attack to the next level. I was sure of it. However, first, I wanted to get stronger with my fists.

Once we’d exterminated the monster swarm, we decided to take it easy and kept the final leg of our journey to the city nice and leisurely.

“Odd that the monsters around here are so much stronger than in Astarte, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah, no kidding. Hey, what rank were those monsters we just fought?”

“Oh, hmm. I’d say they were likely Rank C.”

“That’s really C-Rank? Yeesh. They weren’t weak, I guess, but there’s gotta be a huge gulf between B and C.”

“I suppose you’re right, now that I think on it. The same rule seems to apply to adventurers at those ranks as well.”

Before we knew it, we’d arrived at Mussen Morgeth. It was way taller than Astarte, not to mention pretty much every tree I’d ever seen. Actually, it really didn’t look like *anything* I’d ever seen. The entire city was constructed entirely of stone. In this world, it was most common for houses to be built with earth magic (or in the case of my cottage, the hard work of sweet muscles), but Mussen Morgeth was a gigantic exception. Actually, Astarte’s wooden houses were probably even rarer.

“Goodness, what an amazing city!” gasped Filia.

“Yeah, check out that coliseum! Are they going to hold a battle tournament there? Aww *yeah*, I’m gettin’ all fired up!”

“It looks like a real feat of engineering, too.”

Even with all the stonework wonders rising up around us, I couldn’t keep my eyes off the coliseum. It towered over the rest of Mussen Morgeth, this grand stone monolith just begging new challengers to step into the ring.

Mussen Morgeth was called the “City of Valor,” and once a year, a magic battle tournament raged in that very coliseum. The next tournament was in two weeks, which was one of the top reasons I’d wanted to come.

Sure, other places sounded equally dangerous and exciting, but they were too far away or I needed to do more research on ’em first, so they hadn’t been pragmatic choices. For now, we were here, and I was going to give it my all.

We booked a stay at an inn, then stopped by the local branch of the adventurer’s guild. We were too late to accept any requests, but we were ready to nose around for any we could take the next day.

But as we entered, a wave of curious gazes fell upon us. Probably because Filia was gorgeous, right? Once again, my muscles were going to lose out.

Couldn’t someone, somewhere in this mixed-up world of ours, understand the raw appeal of my rockin’ bod? As we walked to the bulletin board, I enlarged my muscles as coolly and casually as possible. Soon enough, all those eyes had traveled from my captivating partner to my *extremely* captivating body.

“Hey, those two are...pretty strong, huh? Especially the guy.”

“Huh? I mean, putting aside the girl—man, she’s so pretty it’s almost funny—there ain’t no way that inhuman master of muscle next to her is *that* strong. I mean, look. His clothes are all torn apart.”

“Probably one of those poor shmucks with no magical energy. Bet these two got all high and mighty back where they came from, two mid-sized fish in a little bitty pond, and now they’re here. But I’ll tell ya, one look at that chunky one and I can tell, he’s not gonna manage much. That cute girly, on the other hand...”

“Aw, I’d love to have her *join my party*, if you know what I mean. We could *slay some monsters* together. With *wind magic*, wink wink, nudge nudge.”

Oh ho! Though it was only a few people, *some* folks recognized my strength! Just as I expected, the people in Mussen Morgeth were considerably stronger than the people from Astarte. Very nice. Pretending not to hear the praise, I scanned the bulletin board.

“Hm?” I tilted my head, not quite sure what I was seeing. “Hey, doesn’t something seem weird to you?”

“Yeah, it does.” Filia crossed her arms and let out a “hmp,” tilting her head, too. There we stood next to the board, heads tilted, “hmmph”-ing together.

“What’s the matter, little lady?” said a huge guy. Perhaps he saw we were confused. To be clear, when I said he was huge, I meant he was *tall*. In terms of width, he was just as thin and frail as everyone else.

“Your bulletin board skips Rank D,” said Filia.

Just as she said, there wasn’t a single D-Rank request posted on the bulletin board. There were E-Rank requests, but there was no point in us coming all the way to the city just for those.

The man gave us a long, pitying look. “Well, little lady, I’m sorry to break it to ya, but there *aren’t* any D-Rank requests. This city’s more dangerous than that. All outgoing requests are Rank C or higher.”

Wait, wait, really? So did that mean that even after coming all this way, we had to regress back to E-Rank requests? Filia glared at me. It was almost like I could read *her* mind: *Yuri, this is all because you couldn’t stop whining about Astarte and dragged us all the way here without*

doing proper research, you ab-addled idiot!

“Yuri, this is all because you couldn’t stop whining about Astarte and dragged us all the way here without doing proper research, you ab-addled idiot!”

Oh, she actually said it out loud! Okay, yeah. Coming here *had* been the result of me acting on my own authority without consulting her and just...going for it. My credibility was hitting rock bottom right about now. Was there really nothing I could make out of this?

Well, I figured I could at least try asking this guy for insight.

“Hey, fella. Isn’t there some kind of secret trick or backdoor option we can use? I wanna get straight from Rank D to Rank C.”

When I asked him, his face went red. “Hey, is that really the tone you wanna take with me?”

Oh, I guess I’d made him mad? I mean, using stuffy language was a big pain in the butt, so I didn’t usually bother. Guess I might have come off as rude. Something to think about. I mean, when I had time. And the energy. And the inclination.

“I’m so sorry, this is our last chance, sir,” Filia pleaded. “Please, is there anything we poor, lost adventurers can do?” Filia leaned forward, clasped her hands together, and looked at him with her bright, hopeful eyes. Sly. Just like I’d expect from her—veeeeery sly.

The man’s face went red again, but not with anger. No, one of the most beautiful girls in the world was pleading with him in her coyest, most calculated take on an innocent damsel in distress. Anyone would get flustered when faced with that attack. Heck, even *I* was feeling a little flustered.

Blushing and stammering all the while, the man gave in and explained a method for getting to Rank C. Apparently if we could make it through to the advanced round of the upcoming magic battle tournament, we would be recognized as worthy of Rank C and the guild would finally let us accept C-Rank requests.

“Thank you ever so much for your kindness!” said Filia in a high, birdsong pitch. She granted the man a dazzling, flowery smile, and he went even redder, like a boiled octopus.

“Oh! Uh! Thanks! To *you*, actually! M-maybe we can have something to eat together sometime? In a restaurant?” He coughed.

“Together,” he repeated.

“Ohhhhhhhh no, oh goodness, I’m so sorry! You see, I’d be scared to be all alone with a gentleman such as yourself! Thank you ever so much for the offer, though, tee hee!” She nodded at me. “All right, Yuri, let’s blow this joint.”

With that, Filia took my hand and we left the guild. What powerful dark energy! *I’d be scared to be all alone with a gentleman such as yourself*. Brutal. Nothing scarier than a woman who’s honed her cuteness to a razor’s edge.

Shortly after we stepped out of the guild, Filia looked back at me and with puffed up cheeks said, “You do realize I obtained all that information for your sake too, Yuri? And it wasn’t a lie, either—I *would* be scared to be all alone with that man.” Reading my mind again.

“Aren’t you always alone with me, like at the inn?”

“Yes, but that’s—” Filia paused. She spoke quietly. “Yuri, it’s not because—see, you’re different, and special, so...” Filia trailed off. If she did say anything, I couldn’t hear it, not even with my well-trained ears. Not that I always understood what she said even when I could hear her.

I blinked. “Special? Special how? In what way?”

“Uh...ooh! I know, it’s because rather than a guy, you’re more like an overgrown muscle, Yuri!”

What was with the “ooh!” there? Was it a battle-cry meant to intimidate me? She had to use her lower lungs, too, if she wanted to try one of those. Even so.

“You can say some nice things after all, huh, Filia? Yeah, that’s right! Before I’m a man, I’m a muscle! Hrnnnnn.” I flexed my arm, released my muscle, and showed off my sublime bicep to Filia. Come on, check ’em oooooooooo! “Oh, one more thing. If you want to intimidate someone, you gotta dish out something with more oomph! Lower lungs, fill ’em *allll* up! Here, check it out, like this. HOOAAAHHH!”

“Yuri,” said Filia, “you are an idiot beyond salvation. Also, you’re *far* too noisy, so could you please, oh, please shut up?”

What the heck was with this kind of treatment? Even though I was showing her proper techniques and everything! I just didn’t get Filia. When I got quiet just as she told me to, Filia let out a laugh.

“Hee hee. You really are a bizarre person after all, aren’t you, Yuri?”

“Really? From my point of view, you’re way more bizarre.”

“Aw, you really think so?” Filia asked in a singsong voice, putting a finger to her cheek and tilting her head at me.

Well, at least she was in a better mood.

Now that we were set to enter the magic battle tournament, we needed to undergo some special training. It was early in the morning and the birds sang their morning hymns. Filia and I stood facing each other on an open field just outside of Mussen Morgeth. Since only low-rank monsters showed up in wide open fields like this, it was the perfect place for special training. We’d also come out pretty far from the city proper, so we didn’t see any signs of other people in the area.

Nobody else around. Good visibility. I kind of felt like we were really out in the wilds. The wind blew gently, playing with Filia’s long silver hair, and her clothes fluttered in the breeze.

“Do I really have to shoot you with magic directly, Yuri?” asked Filia uncertainly.

“How else am I gonna understand how effective your attacks are? I mean, to be frank, I want you to get stronger, too! And you know, we’re going to be facing B-Rank adventurers in this tournament. I’m aiming to be the champion, but if you stay at your current level, you might not even make it to the advanced round. If that happens, you won’t even qualify for Rank C, and then we won’t be able to take requests together, right?”

“Yes, it’s all out of the kindness of your own heart, and *definitely* not because you just intend to train yourself.” Filia’s silver eyes focused on me with laser precision, brimming with doubt.

However, I’d learned that at times like these, I just had to say what I was really feeling. Otherwise, she’d just read my mind. “That’s part of it, too, yeah. But it’s not a lie that I want to be able to keep taking requests with you, Filia.”

“Okay... I’ll do what I can.”

Despite her reluctance, Filia agreed in the end.

And I mean, I did want to stay partners. Just psychologically speaking, having an ally with recovery magic brought me profound peace of mind. I wanted to take requests together for as long as we possibly could.

Not that those thoughts really came to mind whenever I ran into someone strong, perhaps unfortunately. At that point, all I could ever think was “FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT!”

“First is fire magic,” I said. “Bring it!”

“Okay, okay! Yeesh.”

At my signal, Filia blasted me with a fire spell and I took it head-on. Oof! Getting hit with her magic really was good training after all.

Step by step, spell by spell, we confirmed things like how many times Filia was able to cast her spells before she tired, how fast it took her to fire off this or that magic, and finally held a mock battle...not that I did any fighting back. Only Filia was on the attack; I took whatever punishment she could dish out.

After all, this training wasn’t for me, it really was for Filia’s sake. Please believe me there, okay? When I observed Filia’s fighting style, I’d noted her magic was pretty powerful, but her spellcasting was so random. No sense of tactics at all. When I asked Filia about that, she said it was because she had only ever fought against lower rank monsters.

I didn’t think that was going to get her anywhere fast in the tournament, so I started teaching her how to properly land her attacks. We put our practical training on hold for a moment, and—standing in the middle of the open field—I gave her a lecture.

“Listen up, Filia. What do you think you should do to try and hit an evasive enemy?”

“If they’re evasive, you’re going to want a fast spell. Isn’t that obvious?”

“That’s certainly important, yeah. But it’s not enough. You’ve gotta predict your opponent’s movement. To do that, you need to really concentrate and keep your eyes open. As long as you can read your opponent’s movements, with your level of magical power, you should

be able to handle yourself pretty well.”

“Predict their...hmm. Interesting.” Filia nodded rapidly, as if she were realizing something for the first time. With her skill, I would’ve thought Filia had already known beginner stuff like that, but I guess her raw talent couldn’t make up for a lack of combat experience.

“Another effective option is to block your opponent’s escape routes. Lure your opponent in, then nail ’em with your magic. You’re a clever one, Filia, so I think that’s probably a good general strategy for you.”

“Understood. I’ll give it a try.”

With another quick nod of understanding, we once again resumed our mock battle. After that talk, her movements improved quite a bit. It was like I could see more resolve in her actions. Filia was intelligent, after all. If we continued at this rate, there was no telling how much stronger she’d be by the time of the tournament.

At which point she collapsed, huffing and panting. “I’m...ugh...completely out...huah...of magical energy...” Despite the fact that it hadn’t even been two hours since our training began, her legs were jelly, wobbling like she was a newborn fawn.

“I suppose that’s it for today then, huh? Let’s do it again tomorrow.”

“And you’re...*not*...out of breath?” Filia heaved.

I shrugged. “We’ve just got different daily routines.”

“Guhhhh. It’s...annoying, but I can’t argue...with that,” said Filia, her face twisting with frustration.

Despite her attitude, she did seem way more motivated than before.

With Filia beat and further training a non-option, we walked back to the inn, Filia wobbling like a zombie all the while. At the inn, she immediately dove onto the bed. Although she did clean her body and her clothes using her practical magic, Filia was so wiped that once she laid down, she didn’t move a single muscle. Probably the lack of magical energy.

Recovery magic treated injuries, but it didn’t appear to be effective in healing fatigue. Whenever Filia tried to ease her exhaustion

with it, she completely tapped her arcane reserves.

“I’m so tired. I can’t even move a single step...alas. What a terrible fate...”

“Great work today. Rest up.”

Filia was still trembling so I stepped outside to let her nap. It wasn’t like I was heading out to play or anything, though. No, I had grocery shopping to do.

Walking around the city and all its huge stonework all alone felt kind of strange, though. Up until that moment I’d almost always been out and about with Filia.

It had been several days since our arrival in Mussen Morgeth. Maybe it was a good idea for me to get a better look at the place, really get the lay of the land. Filia had gone out to investigate Astarte while I was training, but I hadn’t yet been blessed with the opportunity to check out a city all by myself.

“This place is pretty lively, huh?” I said to myself.

I wandered between sights and landmarks that I hadn’t ever really seen until that moment. A variety of stores selling every imaginable thing lined the streets, and shopkeepers loudly called out to passersby to come in and give it all a look, because boy did they have a deal for *you*! People peeked at wares set up in tidy little lines, picked and bought this or that, finished their meals at street carts, made their way to wherever they were headed in no pattern I could discern, and so on. As I absentmindedly meandered through the steady stream of people, I suddenly remembered Filia, who was practically half-dead back in our room.

Uh oh. Filia might well be awake and tired of waiting for me. After grabbing the rest of the food on my list at a nearby shop, I hurried out the door—and someone lightly tapped me on the shoulder.

“Sir! What’re ya doin’, forgettin’ stuff ya just bought?”

A hand floated right there by my shoulder. Yeah, just, you know, a *hand*.

I glanced back into the store and saw the merchant inside didn’t seem to have anything past his right wrist, so...was this floating thingy *his* right hand? Yup, it was completely separated from his body, and yet it was moving smoothly along like it was all fine. To be perfectly

honest, I found it kind of creepy, but it didn't seem like the merchant agreed.

"Ah, okay. Thanks," I said. I took the items he'd brought to me, put them in the bag of holding at my waist, and bolted back to the inn.

Later, while we shared our evening meal, I described the encounter to Filia. Filia had recovered enough to sit up, and though her arms were still shaking, she was able to bring the food to her mouth.

"So, that's why you looked so spooked when you got back. I don't really get it, though? I don't think there's anything especially strange about that hand..." said Filia, only after thoroughly chewing and swallowing her food. Never talking with her mouth even a *little* full. How elegant!

"But a floating right hand just seems strange no matter how you think about it, right? Is that magic? In that case, what kind of magic is that?"

I mean, his right hand was moving around even though it was disconnected? What was *up* with that? I hadn't ever heard of that kind of magic. Even my muscle magic couldn't match it. The fact was that some random merchant had been able to do something totally wild with a hundred potential combat applications even though it didn't seem likely he'd ever seen battle. And *how*?

After hearing my questions, Filia tilted her head to the side and responded in a thin, trying-very-hard-not-to-snap voice. "Yuri, are you really telling me that you don't know about abilities?"

"Abilities? What're those? I don't know anything whatsoever!"

"You don't need to sound so excited about that." Pushing past her exasperation, Filia explained. "'Abilities' refer to people's unique constitutions and special capabilities. Normally, people have only one ability, though I've heard it said there are those with two called 'dual ability holders.' Abilities also come in a wide variety. Some cost magical energy to wield, others require sheer endurance, and some may be used freely at will."

"Whoa. Wait, so does your Telepathy count as one of these abilities then?"

"That's right. I'm actually fairly certain I already told you that,

though?” Filia frowned.

C’mon, as if I’d remember something like that. Even an intellectual like me has his limits. “Really? Even so, I haven’t had many opportunities to see these so-called abilities in action, not until just now, anyway. Do most people just not have them?”

Maybe it was because I didn’t consciously pay attention to most other people, but I still didn’t have any memory of ever having seen someone else using some weird magic.

“Most people do, actually. There are some few who don’t have abilities, but it’s a rare condition. Those people are labeled—rather rudely, in my opinion—as ‘incompetents.’ People like you Yuri, who cannot use magic, are also called ‘incompetents.’” An odd, complicated look crossed Filia’s face as she said this.

“I see,” I said lightly. Incompetent because I couldn’t use magic, eh? I didn’t really care if it was derogatory. These folks could say whatever they wanted, I was still stronger than any lame name-callers.

And wait, actually, it wasn’t even accurate! I could use muscle magic. Why *wasn’t* that considered a full-fledged arcane art? Regardless, they’d probably call me incompetent anyway for not having any of their high-falutin’ abilities.

“Let’s see, what else...ah, right. It would be ridiculous if abilities were all combat-oriented, so there are some abilities that simply aren’t meaningfully usable in battle. Furthermore, some are incredibly specific.”

“That so, huh? So, for example, the former would be like being able to read a book in an instant, while the latter would be something like the ability to get super buff but only at night. Something like that?”

“Yes, something like that. And your ability has nothing to do with effort or training. Only luck. Whatever you’re born with—or *not* born with—is what you have for the rest of your life.”

Aww. I’d kinda wanted to see if I could get some sort of ability myself. Something like ‘the ability to continuously enlarge all of my muscles!’ That would be pretty interesting.

Filia read my mind and furrowed her brow. “That’s an idea that could boggle the mind of everyone in the entire world.”

Yeesh, she was always so extreme about these things.

“Well, that’s because my imagination goes far beyond the ordinary.”

“Far, far beyond and straight to the land of ‘deeply stupid.’”

Bang bang. She’d shot me down. Filia gazed at me with a triumphant look on her face and let out a smug little chuckle.

In retaliation, I ever so lightly touched Filia’s quivering, delicate arm.

“Boo,” I said.

“EEK!” The instant I touched her skin, Filia immediately recoiled. Then she let out a soundless scream. I was surprised by the degree of her reaction. Was her condition really that bad?

“You’re so awful! Just horrendous! Vile demon, Yuri!”

“S-sorry.”

I’d made her mad. Scary.

Filia glared at me with broken-hearted resentment in her wide, teary eyes. I had no choice but to apologize.

Chapter 10: The Tournament Approaches

A PLEASANT WIND BLEW through the grassy plain and stroked my muscles. Hot *damn*, it felt good. It was like I was one with nature—the kinda refreshed, exhilarated feeling that got me passionate about another day’s training.

“Whew, this feels amazing, Filia! Don’t you think?”

In contrast with the idyllic scenery, Filia shouted back: “I feel like I might throw up, so could you please shut up for just a minute?”

She scrunched her face into an expression rather unbecoming of a maiden. Looked like she was just about at her limit again.

Behind Filia—who was desperately trying to maintain her dignified beauty despite being porcelain-pale and retching—I saw two figures approaching from the distance. They were coming from the direction of Astarte. Maybe we knew them?

I focused, and as my eyes flexed I caught sight of someone’s characteristically peculiar blond hairstyle—a truly volcanic bedhead.

“Ahh. The great beauty has recovered. I’m ready for more training,” muttered Filia.

“Hey, Filia. Looks like Babandongas is coming.”

“Eh, Babandongas is...is *what*?”

Filia and I put our training on hold and watched as Babandongas caught up to us. He gave us a cheerful wave when he recognized who we were. Beside ol’ pointy head was a meek young girl with pale blue hair.

“Hey, strangers!” called Babandongas, grinning ear to ear. “What are you two doin’ out in the open all the way out here?”

“Filia’s getting in some hardcore extra training for the magic battle tournament.”

“Huh, that’s unexpectedly gung-ho of you, Lia,” said Babandongas.

“Compared to what? Do I not usually seem *motivated* to you?”

Babandongas put a finger to his chin, like he was deep in thought. “Hmm. Well, I wouldn’t say you don’t seem motivated, it’s more like you got this persona. You seem like somebody who just lives life as it goes, I guess. Haven’t ever seen you fight, though, Lia, so I admit that’s just the impression I got from lookin’ at ya.”

Filia was oddly pleased with that answer—or maybe by the nickname? She clapped her hands, a radiant smile on her face. “Ah, naturally. My appearance is indeed perfect, is it not?”

“All right, Filia, break’s over, now let’s turn up the heat on your training! We’re going *twice* as hard!”

“The, ah—oh dear, me? Little old me? Why, Yuri, I am nothing more than a mere pebble, and a runt of one at that. I am sorry that I, who is practically like a germ, opened her mouth,” said Filia.

“Wh-whoa, okay, no need to get that self-deprecating...” I was really spooked at the degree of this sudden change.

Though her face was turned down, she still glared up at me. In the shadows of her eyes I saw a wild intensity.

“Yuri,” she said, emphasizing each word, “you have no idea how scary your threat was. Twice as hard? I feel like I’m already about to die right now! If you double the training, I’ll die at least three times over.”

“Come on, you’re fine now, so you’ll be fine even if we double the regimen. And now that I think about it, if you’re fine with doubling it, you’ll be fine if we increase it tenfold.” I nodded to myself. “Tenfold it is, then—what do you say?”

Babandongas’s jaw dropped. “Now what kind of devil math was that?”

“Babandongas,” Filia moaned, “please put a stop to Yuri’s recklessness. At this rate, I may be swept past the point of no return.”

“It’s not good to be so forceful,” said the girl beside Babandongas.

Her delicate blue hair had been styled into a bob with bangs. She had calm, cold eyes and a pretty face, and she came up to about Filia’s chest. Although she looked quite small, she was probably around thirteen or fourteen years old, so she was about the right height for her age.

My first impression had been that she was meek and quiet, like a prey animal. However, her dignified posture told me she was no kind of

timid.

“Babandongas, whoever is this cute girl?” cried Filia, clasping her hands in delight.

Any remaining worry vanished from Babandongas’s face at that question. “Why, this cutie-pie is my little sister, Voltemia. Voltemia, these adventurers are Yuri and Filia.”

“Yes, I’m Voltemia.” Blank-faced as a doll, she gave us a small bow. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Strange. Very strange. When Voltemia stood straight again, I stared intently at her face. I was almost positive that I sensed something out of place.

“Hey, Babandongas.”

“Yeah?”

“Kidnapping is a crime, you know.”

I had thought Babandongas was a good guy, but it seemed I was mistaken. No matter how you looked at it, he didn’t resemble this girl at all.

After a moment of quiet exasperation, Babandongas shouted, “She is! My little sister! Voltemia!” putting pure indignation into every syllable.

“Babandongas is indeed my older brother,” said Voltemia.

Oops. “Huh. You really are siblings. Welp, sorry for doubting you.”

Humans really are mysterious. To think siblings could be so lacking in any kind of similarity. The more I looked at them, the less alike they seemed. They didn’t have a single thing in common. The only thing they shared was that they were both human beings. I still had a hard time believing it, but I guess it was true.

“Well, yeah, it’s true there’s no real resemblance. Even I’m puzzled about that,” Babandongas admitted.

“My brother’s got a scary face, but he’s gentle.”

“I see.”

Casually throwing out a follow-up statement to cover for big bro. What a good kid.

“Eee! Voltemia, you’re just! So! Cute! Aren’t you, huh? Huh?” said Filia as she bent her knees to be eye-level with Voltemia.

Voltemia looked back and forth, as if watching an invisible fly, and her face turned slightly pink from embarrassment. “Thank you. You’re very pretty and cute too, Miss Filia.”

“Ohmigods. I. I can’t. I-Isn’t she almost *too* cute?” Filia cried, writhing in agony. “What should I do, Yuri? She shall dethrone me! My position as the cutest in the world is threatened!”

“Yep, yep, I guess you’re doomed.”

“Come on, don’t say silly stuff like that, Lia,” said Babandongas. “Voltemia is obviously *already* the cutest in the world!”

“Big brother, that’s so embarrassing. Please stop saying things like that, or...well, I’ll hate you, okay?”

“Oh no! I, um! Please forgive me! Big brother is so, so sorry!” Babandongas frantically shook his head, despairing.

Yeah, you could see it from a mile a way. What was the phrase? Babandongas had a total sister complex.



“My little sister is a prodigy, you know?” he said proudly as he patted Voltemia’s head. “She only registered as an adventurer last year and she’s already Rank B.”

Voltemia’s eyes were closed and she looked happy, though modest.

“Oh no. Yuri, she. Look at that. Right there. Do you see how cute that is? I’m...I’m fading away, Yuri.” Filia’s agony continued unabated.

“Did you guys come here for the magic battle tournament, too?” I asked.

“Well, yeah,” Babandongas shrugged. “I was last year’s champion, ya know. But I can’t participate this year.”

Hm? I was surprised enough to hear he’d won, but what did he mean when he said he couldn’t enter again?

“Well, why not?”

“It’s for B-Rank adventurers and below.”

Ohh. “They’ve stripped you of your status as an adventurer?”

“Pshh! As if! You knucklehead, I got up to Rank A this year! Which means I don’t qualify anymore.”

I see, so that was it. And here I thought I’d be able to fight him. What a shame.

“That’s why I won’t be joining, but who knows? Maybe you’ll be facin’ off against Voltemia! Though if you do match up with her, I’ll be cheerin’ on my little sister with everythin’ I got!” he said happily.

Wow, he really couldn’t stop talking about his sister for half a second, huh? Toootal sister complex.

“Welp, I’m gonna be the champion,” I said. “So if Voltemia gets to the final match, I probably *will* end up fightin’ her.”

“You know, after saying all of that it *would* be pretty funny if you got completely owned,” Filia mused.

Jeez, Filia really had no fighting spirit. Was that just an elf thing? If she only summoned up the motivation, I bet she could do so well, too. She had so much talent! What a waste.

“It’s not like anyone goes into a fight thinking they’re going to lose,” I told her sternly. “There’s no need to think about something like

losing before the fight even begins.”

“Hey, yeah, Yuri! That’s a good point there!” said Babandongas, clearly on the same wavelength.

Just like I thought, he and I were alike. Maybe he’d come to like muscles, too! I brought my arm closer to him. “You get it, man. Now how about a celebratory muscle touch? They’re waiting.”

“Huh? Kinda sudden there, friend—uh, n-no thanks, I mean, they’re *nice* and—and impressive, but—”

“I get it.” Ah well. I guess even he wasn’t yet ready for the power of muscles. It always seemed to go like this, no matter who I tried to show, but every time it was a little disappointing.

“I’ll do my best,” said Voltemia meanwhile. “Because big brother will be watching me.” She made a fist with her small hand.

“Ohmigods did you all see that isn’t she such an angel my little sister is just so perfect can you even believe that she...” Babandongas was fighting back tears. What a drama king.

At long last, the day of the tournament arrived. With Filia and I both awake, we got down to breakfast—that is, we made breakfast for one another, alternating. There wasn’t a...huge difference in our culinary skill level.

I scarfed down my meal and beamed. “Doesn’t it feel good to be all done?”

“So many near-death experiences, so little time. Those were the worst two weeks of my life.” Filia purposefully wobbled and trembled. And she’d been so serious during training, too! Well, I suppose it was a good sign that she could switch it on or off.

“After the tournament’s over, you’re gonna stop training, huh? What a waste.”

“I wouldn’t say that. I won’t be doing *battle* training for a while, but I’ll be working hard to develop new magic.”

“Oh? Ooh, that sounds nice. I wonder if I should think up some new magic too. It’s been a long time.”

“You’re still insisting on calling it magic, are you?”

“Because it is.”

Finally, we made our way to the coliseum. The street leading up to it overflowed with people. Tons of stalls lined the streets, packed tightly together to sell their wares to the huge crowds. A complex smell wafted through the air, a combination of exotic spices rising from the various goods and foods on display. It seemed a lot livelier than any regular festival.

Filia marveled at the crowds, her silver eyes wide with wonder, her mouth agape. She looked genuinely stunned. “There’s such an incredible number of people here! Do humans like watching people fight each other so much?”

“Course, there’s a ton of people like that. Is it different for elves?”

“Elves fundamentally dislike conflict.”

Was that why Filia had so much trouble adjusting to battle? I turned this nugget of info over in my head while we walked in through the massive stone gate to the coliseum.

First we made our way to the competitor waiting hall, where we learned they were going to hold qualifiers first. B-Rank adventurers automatically qualified to enter the main rounds, so everyone in the hall with us was either Rank C or Rank D. Dozens of hopeful contestants were crammed together, filling the air with tension like we were all on edge. Only seven of us would make it in to the real fight.

I glanced around the hall to evaluate the competitors. There wasn’t anyone stronger than Filia, that was for sure. With Filia’s talent where it was now, she could easily take out a brokirin. I’d say she was probably now in the territory of Rank A.

We had some free time before our turn in the ring, and just waiting around for things to start seemed like a waste.

“All right, let’s goooo!” I crowed.

While everyone else was on pins and needles in the pressurized atmosphere, sitting all stiff in their chairs, I started muscle training in the corner. If you have free time, train your muscles. Muscle training won’t betray you. (And get this, when I started muscle training, Filia pretended not to know me! Rude much?)

“The time has come. All participants, please head into the arena.”

Perfect. We headed on in. The coliseum could comfortably seat thousands of people, but despite its size, it was beyond packed. According to the master of ceremonies, people came from all over the country to see the tournament.

“Alll riiiiiiiiight, ladybugs and germs, let’s get down to *business*! First up, we got your qualifiers! In the qualifier round, our magical mystery competitors will be split into groups and duke it out with their new pals. The last one standing in each group advances to the real competition! That’s the way this brutal! Cookie! Cruuuuuuumbles!”

The master of ceremonies put up two fingers and glanced over at us.

“And those lucky sons-of-guns who scrape their way to the advanced round will be allowed to take on C-Rank requests! Because it seems we have just a couple D-Rank adventurers participating this time around, we hope you two wild dreamers will aim for the top to make your C-Rank wish come true!”

Huh. So the only D-Rank participants were Filia and I. Well, that was understandable. When the people from Mussen Morgeth reached Rank D, they headed out to other towns. Guess they thought diligently taking on requests in other towns was more safe and stable than trying to reach the advanced round of this magic battle tournament.

But if you ask me, that’s complete nonsense. You can’t become powerful unless you’ve got the spirit to defeat all the enemies life can throw at you!

The master of ceremonies continued, a cheerful smile on his face. “In addition, starting in that advanced round, you’re gettin’ tossed in the ring with B-Rank contestants! Oh, I can feel that heat already, and the grill isn’t even *on*!”

He paused for a second and flipped through an outline in his hands. “Now then, let’s see... I’m sure many of you are already aware of this, but just in case, I’ll explain. This coliseum has been granted the blessing of the Goddess of War. No one in this arena will die from battle; you’ll only lose consciousness. We’ve also got a team of magicians skilled in recovery magic, so don’t hold back! And with that, the magic battle tournament has begun!”

With that, the master of ceremonies began shouting out the names of the first batch of participants. My name was among them.

“This qualifier round will be conducted in the form of a battle royale. All of you whose names I called, please head to the middle of the arena! All other participants, please return to the waiting hall for the time being.”

As the rest left, I assessed the people still standing in the arena. Excluding me, there were four men and two women. They looked weak, but I couldn't let my guard down. Strong people tend to be good at hiding their power, so one of them could well be concealing their abilities. Just in case, I released my limiter and got ready. My muscles swelled like overstuffed sausages, expanding to the max.

“Let the first round of the qualifiers...begin!”

Chapter 11: Magic Battle Tournament

“H_{OOAAHHH!}”

Instantly, I punched out two people. Everyone else in this round seemed to be a magician, so after the signal to begin, they all started mumbling or chanting or whatever. Good for them, but they weren't reciting fast enough. With the first two out of the way, I dashed over to knock out the remaining contestants. It wasn't like I had a reason to wait for them to start firing their spells, you know?

“W-wow! This mysterious muscle man incapacitated everyone in an instant! It's, um...Challenger Yuri!” The master of ceremonies looked pumped. “Is this the emergence of a true contender? Challenger Yuri passes to the advanced round!”

The master of ceremonies was getting all fired up. But me...?

I'd made it through the qualifiers, huh? Huh... That had seemed way too easy. Actually, you know what? It didn't *seem* too easy, it just was! It wasn't like my main motive was to entertain the spectators or anything, but since it was over so quickly and they didn't understand what had happened, the crowd was murmuring darkly. Hopefully a worthier opponent would show up in the advanced round.

After the second match came the third, the fourth, so on. Filia's name was called in the fifth round. As she headed to the center of the coliseum, the crystalleyez—some new-fangled magic crystals that could show moving pictures and the like—projected Filia's face to the audience; the entire venue lost it.

“Whoa! And here we see a pretty little number with a beauty beyond compare! But come on, now, let's remember that looks have nothing to do with battle!”

Not that the crowd cared. Filia's looks really did far surpass any human's. Speaking of Filia, she was staring down her opponents as if she couldn't hear the crowd at all. Good concentration.

“Well then, fifth round! Leeeeeet's...begin!”

All seven contestants started charging their magic. A few seconds

later, Filia was first to cast her spell. She hit a guy right off the bat and he fainted, which scared the remaining five into focusing on Filia. Well, it made sense—a textbook strategy is to take out your strongest opponent first.

“Our beauty is the main target now, and she’s in a real pickle! And...oh, what a magnificent dodge! She weaves through a storm of spells—her form, it’s like watching the Goddess of War herself!”

Filia evaded each of her opponents’ spells with effortless grace. Then she blasted the hell out of them with magic. What an incredible performance! I’d like to think I had something to do with her agility, thank you very much. I held my head high, proud of my pupil.

After roasting the final contestant with fire magic, Filia safely cleared the round.

“Marvelous! Challenger Filia! With that gorgeous, heart-pounding victory, you’re up for the advanced round!”

“Yo, good work,” I called out to Filia.

Filia let out a long, relieved sigh—pheeew! “Well I’ve achieved Rank C now, so I suppose I can relax for the rest,” she replied with a smile.

As far as I was concerned, the *real* fight was about to begin, but Filia didn’t care about that. Fair enough!

“You were really elegant out there. Great work.” I patted Filia on the shoulder.

When I did so, her body stiffened in surprise. “Huh? What’s the matter with you, Yuri? It’s kinda scary.”

“What is?”

“There’s no way you would know such a refined word as ‘elegant,’ Yuri. Ah, don’t tell me...you’re a doppelganger, aren’t you?” Filia shifted into a fighting stance, and I gave her a light thunk on the head.

“Owww! How brutish! You know I’m opposed to violence!” said Filia, squatting down while rubbing her head, just a little teary-eyed.

“The tournament isn’t over yet. Focus.”

“Okaaaaaay.” She really wasn’t motivated anymore, huh? It was a little refreshing, after seeing how driven she’d been in battle.

Once the qualifier matches were over, I was a little disappointed; no one had seemed powerful enough to care about. I’d just have to wait to see the seeded challengers in the advanced round.

“AlIIIIIIII *right*, that concludes the qualifiers! We ask that you all please calm your bloodlust long enough for us to apply recovery magic to those lucky enough to pass into the advanced round!” announced the master of ceremonies.

Meanwhile, in the waiting hall, seven people dressed in white came through to check on us, one magician per patient. I refused their offer of healing—“I’m not injured, so there’s no need”—and hung out on the sofa. After everyone had been treated, the healers left the room, passing a petite young girl as she entered.

“Ah!”

When Filia saw the girl, she called out to her. A young girl with pale blue hair—Voltemia. I stayed where I was as I observed her.

When we first met Voltemia, I hadn’t felt much of anything from her. But now, here, I was picking up an underlying, unshakeable strength. Aura-wise, she felt like...four Grim Reapers at once? Now that’s what I’d been waiting for!

More people started entering the waiting hall then, one after another. The contestants for the advanced round had arrived. All of them had auras light-years beyond those from the qualifiers.

One of the people in this group, a man with a slender build, had a sword hanging from his waist. Was he a swordsman? Contrary to what his handsome actor face suggested, he projected an air of unmistakable power.

“What’s up with this?” the man sneered. “Sticking someone like me in the same waiting hall as the insects? Tsk, what an insult.” He spread his legs wide apart as he took up a full half of the sofa, leaning his weight into it.

Ugh. His face and behavior really didn’t match. The venue staff quietly approached the grumbling, dissatisfied man.

“My most sincere apologies, sir, but individual waiting rooms will

be available for participants engaged in the semifinals and onward. We humbly thank you for your understanding.”

“Oh, I *understand*. Even though I’m the runner-up from last year’s tournament—c’mon, you’ve got to know Leonir Vennet, right?—I’m not treated any different from anyone else then, is that it?”

“I’m afraid so,” said the staff member, bowing.

Leonir’s veins bulged with rage. “Agh, this is making my stress go through the goddamn roof! None of ya’s showin’ me proper respect. Well, fine! Have it your way, all of you. When we get into the ring, how about I kill all of ya? Don’t worry, I’ll treat you average bugs alllll the same, mwa ha ha!” Leonir kicked his legs up onto the table and cackled, his actor-handsome mouth hanging wide open.

After he had his little laugh, he leaned forward.

“Oh ho? Looky here, who’s this pretty little number? Veeeeery nice. I wanna fight her.”

Filia’s cheeks twitched and she leaned in to whisper in my ear, “Ugh, I suppose this revolting creep is talking about me, isn’t he? I’d rather keep as far away from *him* as possible, Yuri. Um...Yuri? Are you listening?”

But her words hadn’t reached me. The moment I saw Leonir, my heart started jackhammering in my chest. My heart was beating so hard, thumping and throbbing with such intensity, that it hurt, like it wanted to burst outta my chest and tackle Leonir head-on!

It was the *best*. This guy seemed strong as hell!

I mean, his behavior was awful, but so what? He was *strong*! I could have real fun with someone strong! A wide smile crept up on my face as I basked in the atmosphere of being around such powerful people. I’d never felt such a mighty, overwhelming presence in my life! And among those there, I sensed that two of them, Voltemia and Leonir, were especially outstanding. Nice! This was exactly why I’d wanted to come to this city.

More proof that fighting was the best!

“Hey, Yuri, are you listening? Yuuuriiii?”

“Ah, I wanna hurry up and fight already!”

“Yuri, are you—” Filia glanced around “—are you *high* or

something? We don't have time for this right now! Wipe that lunatic look off your face and focus!"

"Only thing I'm high on is *hot-blooded adventure*. I'm gettin' fired up! Come on, Filia, get fired up!"

"And just when I think a weird, dangerous creep waltzed right in, I remember that I came here with one," muttered Filia. She let out a long sigh. I barely noticed: I was just grateful to end up in this once-in-a-lifetime tournament!

The matchups for the advanced rounds were decided by a drawing by the master of ceremonies.

"Aaaaaaare you ready, ladybugs and gentlemen? For this first match, we have Challenger Chorikko versus Challenger Biifun! Both challengers, to the coliseum!"

We were on the fifth match now, and so far everyone was pretty strong. Even so, Voltemia and Leonir stood apart. It was a shame I wouldn't be able to fight either of them until the drawings were done again and we got to the final four, but that just meant I had something to look forward to.

Oh, but what if they got paired up and fought against each other? Or no, what if before I fought Leonir, Filia did well in the quarterfinals and fought him first?

Which one of them would win? That was a difficult question. Kinda exciting!

"And now for the sixth match! Challenger Filia versus Challenger Doffol! Both challengers, to the coliseum!"

Just as I was thinking that, Filia got called.

"Okay, I'm heading on out," said Filia. From that point, I watched their fight on the crystalleyez in the waiting hall. Once the MC introduced both fighters to the crowd, the match kicked off.

Filia started with fire magic. Her opponent dodged her first blast, but Filia read his movements and launched a follow-up, driving him into a corner and cutting off his escape. He took a direct hit from her

magic. From that point on, Filia dominated.

Fire, water, lightning, wind. Filia launched an assault of consecutive spells so intense it almost made me feel sorry for the poor guy. After that display, Filia advanced to the second round. Filia, seen up on the crystalleyez, made a “V” sign and the audience lost it. Even though she didn’t seem all that motivated, she still won. That was pretty huge.

“For the seventh match, we have Challenger Doch versus Challenger Yuri! Both challengers, to the coliseum!”

Filia and I passed each other while I was on my way in.

“Filia is victorious!” she exclaimed.

“Yeah, I saw.”

“An entrancing performance, don’t you think?”

I glanced at a spot on the ground.

“How cruel, ignoring me just after my victory,” she said, sniffing.

“Well, I was just thinking, it’d be great if I could fight you myself.”

“Huh? I’d hate that. You’re terrifying in a fight, Yuri.” Filia looked serious and shook her head vigorously. Did she hate the idea that much?

“Ah, yeah...” Seemed like as good enough a response as any. With that, I made my way into the coliseum.

From there in the center, I could see everyone in the audience, every single detail.

“Alllllll *right*, folks! Now, for our seventh match, witness a furious fight between Challenger Doch, a master of earth magic, and Challenger Yuri, the inhuman master of muscles who passed the qualifiers without using any attack magic!”

“Inhuman master of muscles,” eh? The master of ceremonies here had a pretty good eye. I guess that got it across pretty well!

Oh, uh, it was time for me to focus more on my opponent instead of the commentary, huh?

“Match seven, begin!”

I drew in close right away and walloped the guy. The end. Sigh.

“And just like that, it’s done! Talk about over in a flash! Challenger Yuri advances yet again!”

With all the first round matches out of the way, we moved on to the second round. Since there was a healer offering recovery magic after every round, you really didn’t have to worry about putting your all into every match.

The matches proceeded steadily in this way until finally we were down to the top eight. The next match was a direct showdown between Filia and Leonir.

“Kill everyone, all of them...” Leonir snarled to himself as he headed out to the arena. “Kill, kill, kill ’em all! Eee hee hee!”

Filia glared at him as he was walked out of the waiting hall a step ahead of her, monologuing to himself.

“Can you believe that? He really said ‘kill ’em all,’ Yuri! I really, *really* don’t like this man. Please switch with me? Pretty please, Yuri?” said Filia, tears in her eyes.

Was this one of those times when I should give my partner a nice firm push on the back? I got up close to Filia’s face and spoke to her gently. “Do your best, Filia. Even if everyone else is rooting for Leonir, even if everybody else wants to see you get completely wrecked by him—just totally embarrassed in front of thousands and thousands of people—I’ll still cheer for you.”

“That’s...certainly an image. C-come now, who would root against me? I mean, this is *me* we’re talking about, right? Beloved fan-favorite Filia the elegant, brilliant, incredibly attractive elf. I can’t imagine anyone on the planet who would cheer against me,” said Filia, proudly puffing out her chest that, even after all that muscle training, still wasn’t much to puff.

But I had to respect that self-confidence.

“Just give it your best shot, okay? If you just do that, you’ll be fine.”

After saying this, I gently pushed Filia forward. Even if I rooted for her, she and Leonir were about equal in strength. It was all going to come down to attitude.

“If I must, I must, but I’m not particularly excited about fighting that cackling psychopath.” Filia trudged out of the waiting room, her

steps sluggish and heavy.

Hmm. Was she going to be okay?

“And now, the third match of the quarterfinals: Challenger Leonir versus Challenger Filia! Both challengers, to the coliseum!”

The opening of the battle flashed onto the crystalleyez. The two of them stood on opposite ends of the coliseum arena.

“Oh, it’s you, huh? Cute little face ya got there, girl. Can’t take my eyes offa it. Just my favorite kinda face, the kind I just *looove* to smash to a bloody, black and blue pulp!”

“Oh, do you? How sad for you, to miss out on your disgusting little hobby when I annihilate you.”

Filia gave him a stony look and waved him off like he was a dust mote. Where had all that terror gone? I suppose Filia *could* change her attitude in just a moment, and she was a talented fighter to boot.

Leonir looked furious after being called out in front of a whole arena. Man, when it came to teasing people, Filia really was the master.

“Sparks are flying, and the fight hasn’t even started yet! In one corner, we have Challenger Leonir, master of the magic sword. In the other, Challenger Filia, who has captivated the crowd with her exquisite battle technique! Which challenger will the Goddess of Victory smile upon this day? Quarterfinal match...begin!”

With the audience howling and ready to go, the master of ceremonies declared the start.

Leonir drew his sword—but why? There was too much distance; no way was Filia in range. The MC had called him the master of a magic sword or something, so maybe he had some kind of trick up his sleeve? Since I hadn’t seen Leonir fight yet—an accident of the match order had kept me away—I wasn’t sure of anything. Maybe he could shoot some kind of magic from his blade?

“Don’t you dare think you can defy me!” he growled, swinging his sword through the empty air. Wind magic blasted from the tip of the blade, straight at Filia. It was almost too obvious. Filia jumped into the

air and dodged.

Leonir took advantage of that opening and rushed her, swinging his sword. But Filia rained down lightning magic from point-blank range before he could get a single hit in.

“Guuuuuh?”

“Voice of a toad,” said Filia as she pointed at him and unleashed a volley of flames.

“A blast of blaze! Is there nothing more Challenger Leonir can do? W-wait a minute, hold on! Challenger Leonir is *gathering up* the flames! Is this his special ability?”

Cackling, Leonir drew Filia’s fire into his own body. “Ee hee hee hee hee! Did you think you won? Too bad, girly! That was my ability, ‘Flame Eater.’ Flame has no effect on me!”

Leonir swung his sword once again and another slash of wind cut across the battlefield. Filia threw up a wall of water magic just in time.

This wasn’t good. On an objective level, Filia and Leonir were just about equal, power-wise. But if Filia’s fire magic didn’t work against him and she couldn’t find a way to compensate...no, Filia had gone through special training with me. She’d pull through.

I held my breath in anticipation, watching the battle rage, but I couldn’t *do* anything! All I could do was watch.

“Coming in hot, a steaming order of *sweet revenge*!” Leonir blasted Filia with wind magic, but it was different this time—flames roiled in the weaponized gust. Filia dodged, but the flames singed her clothing.

Filia glanced down. Assessed the damage. And, in a low, icy voice that sent shivers through the whole arena, she growled: “I’ll have you know that these were the clothes Yuri picked out for me. You really dared to hurt them. You *really* went there. This is all or nothing, now. It’s over for you.”

Filia closed her eyes and unleashed a power deep within her body, slowly moving both hands downwards. I hadn’t seen that stance before—was this her hidden trump card or something?

Leonir leaped at the opportunity to catch her while she was still and swung his sword, blasting more wind magic. Filia didn’t show any sign of trying to dodge.

The attack hit her head-on, cutting into her cheek. Filia didn't even flinch.

"The hell? You little knife-eared freak, are you *trying* to get hit? Are you *mocking* me? THENTAKE THISANDTHISANDTHIS!" Leonir wildly swung his sword, blasting wind magic at Filia with reckless abandon.

And Filia took every single attack. She bled. She bruised. Her clothes ripped, leaving great swathes of her skin exposed. That bastard Leonir, he was hitting Filia even when she wasn't fighting back. Leonir looked down at her—she was battered and beaten, and she looked like...like a rag doll.

And he *laughed*.

"Mwa ha ha! Wook at the wittle cutie pie! Now that's a look that suits ya. Don't worry, I got one more shot for ya. Tell me, d'ya think the healers can fix *every* scar, or do you think I could stump 'em with this one? Let's find out"

Leonir swung his sword wide. A blast of wind, larger than anything that came before, hurtled toward Filia. It was a nightmare.

Even so, even now, Filia only murmured. "That hurt. Let me show you how much."

In the next instant, a terrible tornado of vicious winds roared to life around Filia, cancelling out Leonir's own wind magic. Filia's raging gusts swirled and wove together until they formed a gigantic humanoid figure—thirty feet high, standing before her. It radiated pure magic.



“Wha?” Leonir collapsed to the ground in shock, as if his will had snapped in two.

Filia was covered in wounds from head to toe. Her chest heaved, she reeled and stumbled, but still she stood.

Do your best!

She had to, I knew she could! Watching through the crystalleyez, I cheered Filia on nonstop like I was in prayer, and if I kept it up, I could keep *her* up.

Meanwhile, Leonir—weak-kneed and near paralyzed with fear—shrunk back, putting distance between himself and Filia.

“Wh-what the hell is that? That’s against the rules!”

“This is the wrath of the Wind God. Do me a favor, Leonir: die quietly.”

The Wind God lurched at Leonir and swung a fist of pure gale. Leonir somehow managed to swing his sword, but his attack withered in the face of the Wind God’s might. Then, in the instant before the Wind God’s fist struck Leonir—

Filia collapsed to the ground as if a puppeteer had cut her strings, and the Wind God dissipated.

“Um, it looks like...” The MC cleared his throat. “Because Challenger Filia has lost consciousness, victory belongs to Challenger Leonir? I guess?”

The MC sounded bewildered. A sparse number of people in the audience clapped hesitantly. No one seemed too excited about the official outcome.

I barely heard; I was shoving past competitors to run to Filia the second she was brought back to the waiting hall. “Hey! Filia, can you hear me? Are you okay?”

“Yuri...” She blinked up at me, exhausted. A healer had brought her back to consciousness. She laughed weakly and smiled, but her hands...they were trembling. “I really did give it my best effort but...it just wasn’t enough, was it? I’m sorry.”

Something deep at the bottom of my heart began to burn. With Filia’s talents, even if she ended up losing to Leonir, it would have been a closer contest if she’d managed to keep her cool. But she hadn’t,

because of her clothes...because I'd picked them out for her, and because they'd been burned. Even though I should've been analyzing her techniques—or Leonir's—right now, I couldn't think of anything but how upset she'd been.

"I'll avenge you. Leave it to me."

"And you call *me* dramatic. You don't have to avenge anybody. Just win this tournament, okay? Just win."

"That was my plan. I'll pick out another outfit for you later."

Filia's eyes were red, but she wasn't shedding any tears. She was holding back so she wouldn't dampen my spirits. That wouldn't do, not when I had so much fighting left to do. Yet when I saw her thin mouth, a strange new thought crossed my mind.

So far in this tournament, I'd been fighting for my sake—but what if I fought for Filia's sake instead? Yeah. That was it. I was gonna deliver the world's most righteous pummeling to that meat-nugget Leonir, and I was going to do it for Filia.

"Now, for the fourth match, Challenger Yuri versus Challenger Coltpupu! Both fighters, to the coliseum!"

With a brand-new sense of purpose, I strode out to the coliseum arena. The master of ceremonies started reading off something or other, but I really wasn't listening at all.

Didn't care, wanted to fight.

"All right, ladybirds and gentlebuds! Let the fourth match... begin!"

I drew in close and threw a punch, but my fist met air.

Huh. Up above?

"Challenger Coltpupu used wind magic to make his body soar! What an evasion! If Challenger Yuri can't use magic, he might have a challenging fight ahead of him!"

Yeah, as if.

I launched my Pistol Punch. My opponent fell to the ground like a swatted fly.

"What in the world is this? It seems as though Challenger Yuri can use wind magic too! Talk about powerful!"

Like everyone else in the world, the master of ceremonies mistook my muscle magic for wind magic, but whatever. Next opponent, please. Chop, chop.

“W-well, folks, that’s all, that’s the end of the quarterfinals! Next up, the semifinals! Oh, but before that, how ’bout we give our furious fighters a little time to kick back before kicking each other, eh? And don’t forget, snacks are a quarter off during intermission! Wait, they aren’t? Ha! Maybe pick some up anyway, eh?”

The master of ceremonies laughed, the audience laughed.

What a freakin’ hoot.

While I waited back in the quiet, peaceful waiting hall, I was surprised with myself. I was getting too heated up. Getting hotter wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, but if the master of ceremonies’ words weren’t even reaching my ears, that was no good. I was having trouble even keeping aware of my surroundings. Had to calm down, somehow. I closed my eyes and cleared my mind, shutting out the ambient noise of the world and focusing on my inner muscles.

After a moment, I felt something soft wrap around my hand—no, it was someone taking my hand in theirs. When I opened my eyes, I saw Filia leaning over me with a concerned look. Thanks to those healer magicians, it looked like I wouldn’t need to worry about her injuries anymore.

“Don’t surprise me like that,” I said, my voice colder than I’d intended.

“I’m sorry. Is it okay if I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure...”

“I’m going to sit next to you,” she replied, and she did. Filia fidgeted for a bit, kicking her legs back and forth, tucking her hair back behind her ears and the like, then opened her mouth to speak. “You know, you’re different right now, Yuri. Don’t you think so?”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” She paused. “Scary, even. Yuri...you seem almost bloodthirsty. Like you’re brooding, maybe even tormenting yourself. Thoroughly un-Yuri-like. So, you see, I have to tell you something. Something important.”

Filia squeezed my hand. She looked me straight in the eye, very

close to me now, and I could see the anxiety in her.

“I might have been overconfident for a moment, but I’m okay now. I’m fine, do you hear me? You don’t need to fight for my sake. It’s much better if you fight for *you*, and for what you want.”

Filia swallowed, took a breath, and continued in a gentle voice. “If you were your usual self in that match just now, you would’ve ended the fight in the first move. That’s what makes you strong, Yuri....you fight because you want to. Because you need to. For you. So please, fight for yourself.”

I was...making her worry about me? Huh. Now that I thought about it, until now, I really had only been fighting for my own pleasure. Maybe I wasn’t used to fighting for other people...or, no, maybe I wasn’t even suited for doing things for others. After all, it’s only natural that you can’t go all out when you’re doing something you’re not suited for.

I never imagined Filia would be the one to teach me that. I faced her with a light smile—I didn’t want her to be afraid anymore. “Thanks, Filia. I’m all right, really. You do pay close attention to me, huh?”

“Eh? That’s...well, *obviously* I do. What kind of partner would I be if I just wandered around oblivious all the time?” Filia’s face reddened. Just a little.

Whatever she meant by that last bit, she was right. I knew why I was fighting now: for me. Thanks to Filia, it was all going to be all right.

Chapter 12: The End of the Tournament

NOW THAT WE WERE down to the final four, another drawing took place. I'd be up against Voltemia in the first match. It looked like I'd only be able to face Leonir in the very last match...if he won his fight. He would, though, given his opponent. One more win, and I'd be going mano a mano with Leonir in the end for sure.

"In that case," I muttered, "I can't lose!"

Voltemia and I stood in the center of the coliseum, facing each other. My entire body was breaking out in goosebumps from the thrill alone. Now this was my kinda tension! I wanted to get *goin'* already, to just get *fighting*, come *onnnnn*! Hurry it up, hurry it up already!

"Now, at long last, it's time for the semifinals! In this match, we have Challenger Voltemia, who advanced this far thanks to the overwhelming power of her water magic, versus Challenger Yuri, the wild child who has no need for rules!"

Hey, who's a wild child with no need for rules? That seemed a little off, right? And not a single mention of my mighty muscles? C'mon!

The master of ceremonies continued on with his woefully unmusclely commentary. "The winner of this match will advance to the final match! Challenger Voltemia is the previous champion Challenger Babandongas's little sister. If she wins, this will be the first time we'll have brother and sister champions! How fantastic is that?"

The excitement of the crowd burned even brighter. Was the MC turning up the heat or matching the audience's energy? Whichever it was, he was doing a good job.

No, I had to focus. Had to think about defeating the girl in front of me.

"It's nice to see you again," said Voltemia politely, bowing her head.

"Yeah, nice to see ya. Let's give it our all, eh?"

"I plan to. I'm going to win, for my big brother's sake."

Voltemia's expressionless face didn't change. A poker face is a real asset in combat because it makes you difficult to read, but it's never been my strong suit. When I fight somebody strong, I can't help but smile.

"Very well, then! Let the first match of the semifinals...begin!"

I drew in close right away. Against a magician, victory went to whoever pulled off the first move. That wouldn't be the case if my opponent was a master of muscle magic, but that wasn't on the menu for dainty Voltemia.

That's what I thought anyway, but right as I slid up, Voltemia unleashed a torrent of raging waters from her hand that slammed into my path.

"If you're going to come closer, go ahead. Let's get this over with," Voltemia said, even as a tidal wave of water surged past her, toward me.

No way could I dodge all that. Her water attack—launched with incredible force and with a super-wide range—swallowed me up. For nearly a minute, the waters continued to flow until the flood gradually subsided.

What remained after was me, standing proudly in an imposing stance.

"That was some pretty sweet magic!" I cackled.

Short casting time, a high level of power, it was nothing to scoff at. This was fun! The best, even, *hell* yeah! Thrilled as I was, my breath was ragged. The current had been more powerful than I thought. I hadn't been able to move while caught in it, and my strength was drained. It had been like being pummeled by a typhoon.

"Tenacious," said Voltemia.

At her gesture, the water changed course, flowing into the air above her to shape into a water dragon. Nothing I could do about *that* new friend except take it head-on all over again. Was she trying to end this quickly with an arcane bombardment? Sorry, kid. Not gonna happen.

I kicked against the ground over and over, sending myself back to get some distance. Her water dragon lifted its head and flew over toward me, its torso twisting and coiling.

“Ha!”

I dodged it and flew into the air. My body defied gravity, rising steadily higher. By repeatedly kicking the air with my feet, I could float as long and far as I needed to.

But the water dragon chased after me, soaring up into the sky. At the sight of this dragon snaking toward the heavens like divinity itself, the audience unconsciously held their breath. Good for them, I guess!

I stopped kicking once I got high enough into the air that I could see every corner of the coliseum. Then I drew back my arm and slammed it up at the sun, firing my Pistol Punch into thin air. The recoil sent me plummeting toward the incoming water dragon at super speed.

“HOOAAHHH—!”

I sliced straight through the water dragon, feet first, demolishing it as I went. When I landed back in the arena, the remains of the dragon rained like a gentle shower.

“All right, in that case, once more.” Voltemia summoned another water dragon.

I wasn’t making any progress at all! I stood tall, striking a guard stance to receive the oncoming water dragon. The dragon had this sense of vitality, almost like it was a real creature. I could practically hear the sound of its heartbeat drumming in the water. This magic really was incredible!

Buuut I was probably giving the kid a little too much credit. With a little more experience, she’d no doubt get a lot stronger, but she wasn’t quite there yet. I’d seen this attack twice now, in all its majesty—and all its flaws.

“Ha!”

I channeled my might through every muscle in my body. As the water dragon collided with my throbbing muscles, it bounced—you heard me—right back at Voltemia.

“Wh-what the heck? The water dragon has revolted against its creator, Challenger Voltemia! Could it be that this is a show of Challenger Yuri’s reflect magic?”

Wrong magic again, master of ceremonies. I keep trying to tell you guys, this is *muscle* magic.



“Wh-what?!”

Flabbergasted, Voltemia nevertheless threw up a water shield to guard against her own dragon—and good for her, sure, but she shoulda been keeping track of *me*.

In that instant, I slid across the ground, under her shield, and popped up on the other side to loom over Voltemia.

“Agh!” Her cold mask fell, and there she stood, staring up at me with a panicked look on her face.

“Booyah.”

With my left hand, I grabbed Voltemia’s arm to prevent her from escaping, and with my right, I socked her. Voltemia went flying, skidded through the arena sand, and didn’t get back up.

“Ladies and gentlemen, even I am left stunned after that wet and wild fight! Challenger Yuri has defeated Challenger Voltemia in superb fashion and will advance to the finals!”

What a great match! Super fun. A little fire still burned within, but it would have to wait. I returned to the waiting hall.

“What an overwhelming assault with his magic sword! Looks like Challenger Leonir is following Challenger Yuri into the finals, where they’ll finally face off!”

The master of ceremonies’ words echoed throughout the coliseum. Leonir was headed to the finals. Those words reverberated in my ears as I leaned into the sofa of my personal waiting room.

For the time being, my body relaxed. You gotta follow high tension with dedicated relaxation. It’s important for peak performance. And I needed my all for what was to come.

There was another brief break before the final match. It seemed like a maintenance crew was working on the venue with earth magic. I didn’t really care how the place looked; I just wanted them to let me fight already. But this was a tournament, which meant there were rules and whatever, and I just had to bear it.

“But I just can’t take it anymore!” I said, shooting up from the couch.

“What on earth are you talking about?” said Filia, who was perched beside me. “Oh, of course—you mean my incredible charm, don’t you?”

“What the heck are *you* talking about?”

Seriously, what went on in that head of hers? All I had in *my* head right now was an insatiable passion for fighting. Absolutely nothing else, no worldly desires or anything to speak of. No one in the coliseum was more hyped for the finale than me.

Not to say I wasn’t already pleased with my fight against Voltemia. Any day with a fight against a master like her was a good day already...but *today* wasn’t over. As long as there were worthy opponents left to fight, I couldn’t be satisfied, no more than I could stop my heart from pounding in my chest.

“Augh, I just can’t wait for the final match. Hey Filia, let’s go right now, you and me! A little fight to warm me up?”

“That is such an awful idea that I feel like even saying ‘no’ is a waste of my breath *and* my limited time on this planet. I categorically refuse.”

Yeowch. How had that perfectly great idea earned such a flat rejection? Wait... You know what? Didn’t matter. I bowed my head to Filia. “Sorry, Filia. I wasn’t thinking about your feelings. I was incredibly rude.”

“Eh? W-well, now, I wouldn’t say you need to apologize for it, though I certainly appreciate it,” she said, looking surprised.

No, of course I had to apologize! I had been an inconsiderate boor. *Little* fight? Come on, Yuri! What are you implying?

“Nah, I don’t want a little fight, I want a *no-holds-barred* fight! You have conveyed your passion! Come, Filia!” I cried, grinning ear to ear.

Filia clicked her tongue. Blinked at me. Was she not picking up what I was putting down? All that deep fiery passion welling up from me? Was she not feelin’ it?

“Bring it, Filia! Come on! Come onnnnnn, Filia!”

“Are you ever, *ever* not thinking of battle?”

Uhhh. Was that some kind of riddle?

Just then, a knock came on the waiting room door. From the other side, I heard a deep voice. "Yuri, you in there? It's me, Babandongas. Is now a good time? Voltemia's with me, too."

"Now? Well, I was just about to duel with Filia."

"He absolutely was not, Babandongas. Please come on in."

Wow, Filia really was something; my respect for her only deepened. Suppressing the desire to fight me in order to entertain guests? Such divine restraint! She had nerves of steel, so powerful was her reasoning and dignity! To be honest, I don't think I could ever achieve that mental fortitude.

"Wow, you really are amazing," I said, gazing at Filia with utter awe.

"I don't really know what kind of misunderstanding we're having this time, but you know what? It's convenient for me. Let's go with it."

Misunderstanding? Ah, she was embarrassed. So cute!

We welcomed Babandongas and Voltemia into my waiting room; they took a seat on the sofa opposite ours and Babandongas gazed about the room with a nostalgic air.

"This sure does bring back the memories. This was where they stuck me last year."

Oh right, he was the champion last time around. Must've really wowed the audience with that bristling hair of his, too.

"So, what'd you come here for?" I asked.

The pensive look on Babandongas's face washed away and he smiled. "Aw, heck, I just thought that since you went and defeated my sweet little sister, we had to come wish you best of luck and cheer you on and all. That is, if we're not in the way. If we are, we'll head on home, no worries!"

Filia shook her head vigorously. "Oh no, please, feel free to stay. Besides, if you two go home now, I'll be stuck in some kind of brutal waiting room duel with Yuri, and I really am not feeling it today."

"A...brutal waiting room duel?" Babandongas repeated.

Weird. I didn't realize Babandongas was hard of hearing. "Brutal waiting room duel, yep. It's a break, right? We've got plenty of time.

And you can't just sit around being idle at times like these. So I don't care who it is, I just wanna fight, ya know?"

Voltemia gave me an odd look, like she was noticing something strange and mysterious. "Yuri, are you inhuman?"

"No, I'm human!"

"Correct you are, Voltemia!" exclaimed Filia.

"Uh, no, it's an incorrect answer? Because I'm human?"

But Filia was beaming.

Voltemia tilted her head. "Hm. If Yuri is inhuman, then how is he communicating using humanoid language?"

"I'm human! I can speak words because I'm *human*!" Why wasn't anyone treating me like a human being? Me, just your everyday normal guy! "For crying out loud...are you all completely devoid of common sense?"

Filia gasped. "Eh? Yuri, did you just use *human* words?"

Of course I did! Was I really the only person in the room with access to basic logic?

Anyway, Babandongas and Voltemia had come by to cheer me on and all, but now that we were face to face, what I really needed to do was tell my former opponent just how freaking fantastic that match had been.

"Voltemia, you were unbelievable! Amazingly strong!"

She was at most still only about thirteen or fourteen years old, but she could use magic that powerful? Awesome! She was definitely on the road to getting much, much stronger.

"Thank you very much," Voltemia answered. But even after I complimented her, her face didn't light up. She kept wringing her small hands in her lap. "But I really did want to win, for my big brother. He was cheering me on with everything he had..."

"An angel... My sister's such an angel!" exclaimed Babandongas.

Jeez. This Babandongas guy looked like he was about to cry. He really needed to chill with the whole sister complex thing.

"Man, though," Babandongas continued, "that sure was some body-strengthening power you got there, Yuri. Looks mighty similar to

what I got, but not quite,” said Babandongas while blowing his nose, blinking his eyes over and over and generally trying to wipe away his messy cry.

So Babandongas had a body-strengthening power, huh? Wait, did *I* have a body-strengthening power too...? Nah.

“I don’t really have an ability though,” I said. Never had, either, or I’m sure I woulda learned about them before Filia had to explain ’em.

“Hm? C’mon, I saw your body change form earlier, right? Ain’t that an ability?”

Seemed he had his doubts, considering how dramatically my body had changed during the battle with Voltemia.

“What, this? It’s all training.”

I released my muscles; they flared with heat and swelled up, bigger and bigger, morphing mightily into their most hardcore form. Then I transformed back to normal as the three of them watched me silently. Released again. Then back to normal.

Release. Normal. Release. Back to normal. Release, normal. Release, normal.

“See?” Release. “Anyone can do it if they train.” Normal.

I repeatedly released and suppressed my muscles again and again, just to drive home that there was nothing miraculous about it. If you believe in muscles, like I do, and continue strengthening your body, you can do it, too. Those who can’t just don’t have enough dedication to the discipline of Muscle Itself.

“Lia,” said Voltemia meekly, “Yuri is broken.”

“He sure is, Voltemia,” said Filia. “He sure is.”

Huh? All that just from showing my muscles? Why? Well, wait, never mind—Voltemia was staring at me. It seemed like she was steadily coming to understand my muscles. There we go! Good eye, kid!

“Wanna touch ’em?” I asked.

I released my muscles once again and held my arm in front of Voltemia. When Voltemia saw my massive arm in front of her face, thick as a tree trunk and way cooler, her mouth hung open in abject surprise. “Wow, he really is inhuman...”

“C’mon, why you gotta go on like that?” What a strange thing to

say! These zoomers just don't understand the value of muscle training, I guess.

After hanging with us for half an hour or so, it was time for Babandongas and Voltemia to clear out.

"You defeated my lovely angel," said Babandongas as they started for the door, "so now you gotta become the champ, okay? Otherwise I can't forgive ya."

"C'mon, big brother, I don't like when you call me things like 'lovely angel.' It's so lame!"

Oof. Owned by his own beloved lovely angel. Even so, I locked eyes with Babandongas. He'd asked something of me, and I had an answer.

"I'm definitely gonna win, because there's a reason I gotta."

"That so?" Babandongas nodded. "Then do your best, man. Promise?"

"We'll be cheering you on," said Voltemia.

With that, the two left.

It was just me and Filia now. Not that this was unusual—we were always together, just the two of us, at the inn. If anything, it seemed like it was more unusual to have company.

Filia stared intently at the door Babandongas and his sister had exited through. Just as I was wondering if there was something on her mind, Filia turned to me. Her luminous silver eyes and hair shimmered even in the dim waiting room.

"Yuri, you mentioned a reason you needed to win just now, didn't you? Would you mind telling me what that reason is?" asked Filia, giving me an inquisitive look.

"Nothing, really," I replied blankly.

"Oh, come now, won't you tell me? You're not usually the evasive type. It doesn't suit you at all. Could it be that—hmm, is it a difficult subject for you to talk about?"

Filia looked increasingly suspicious and my thoughts ran wild. The words she'd said to me just a few hours ago, that speech about "fighting for my own sake," still resonated within my soul. I couldn't have mustered up the power to win against Voltemia if I hadn't been

doing it for myself, for sure. I had to be grateful to Filia for making me realize that.

However.

That didn't change what I wanted to do. My fist trembled. The semifinals had cemented my passion *and* my rage: I was going to beat Leonir to a pulp for Filia's sake. Why? Because it wasn't *just* for her sake. It was what I wanted, too. It just so happened that, sometimes, these things overlapped.

That was it, then. For both myself and for her, I had to do my best for Filia. When it came to her, my passion was inevitable.

"What's that look for? Are you excited about something?" asked Filia, peering at my face.

Her long hair swayed back and forth. Was it that obvious? Wait, when had I started to smile?

"Oh, nothing, really."

"Always a 'nothing, really' with you, isn't it?"

For some reason, I felt way better. I guess that was all Filia's charisma, huh? And here I was saying "nothing, really" over and over. I owed her something else. Something better.

"Thank you, Filia."

Filia sat back in her seat. "How odd. What's been going on with you lately? Did you...catch a cold, perhaps? Are you not all right in the head or something? More than usual, I mean," added Filia, looking quite serious as she flicked my forehead with her finger.

Same old Filia. Well, I wouldn't say anything more. It would be embarrassing to say something like *I, Filia's partner, am here to banish the humiliation of her loss and avenge her! And I shall!* with a straight face.

"Whaaa?" Filia suddenly cried out in a strange voice.

"What? What's the matter?" I asked.

Filia's body didn't look any different, so what was *that* all about?

"Ah, don't be...ridiculous, Yuri. I-It's nothing, really..." Filia was bright red. Yep. Weird. Why was she making a face like that—

Unless.

"Filia. Don't tell me you peeked inside my mind, you—"

The master of ceremonies' voice boomed through the speaker, drowning me out. "Kept you waiting, huh? Well, at long last, preparations for the final match have been completed! Challenger Yuri and Challenger Leonir, please enter the arena!"

"What did you say?" asked Filia.

Filia hadn't heard me, but I didn't have any more time. The finals were going to start any minute now.

"Never mind, no big deal. Gotta go."

I gave up on it and made my way toward the door.

"Okaaaay," said Filia. "Do you mind terribly if I say one last thing?" she asked, her cute voice ringing out clear and sweet as a bell.

"What is it?" I replied, turning around.

"Won't you please do your best, Yuri?" She batted her eyelashes. "For my sake," she added, smirking like a little devil and giggling.

So she peeked into my mind after all! That Filia, smiling so happily. The sheer cheek!

"I'll remember this later, you know?"

"Oh, I'm positively shaking in my boots, Yuri. Why don't you save some of that menace for the fight and smile, hm?" Filia saw me off with a grin and a laugh, as if she didn't have a single shred of worry that I might lose.

Well, fine! After I became champion, I'd drag her along for some training so intense she'd feel like she was going to explode, so there! Hmmph!

A smile crossed my face as I thought that, and I stepped out into the arena for the final match.

The first thing that caught my eye was a massive statue of a woman.

"Our craftsmen have been working overtime to make this final round something special—take a look, warriors and watchers, at this mighty statue of the Goddess of War! Make her proud, fighters!"

A statue of the Goddess of War, huh? Well, they'd erected it outside the battlefield proper, so at least it wouldn't get in the way. I focused on what mattered: him.

"Hey, muscle head."

There stood Leonir, calling over to me. Slender as he was, his body held the taut sharpness of a living scythe. Power positively rolled off of him.

"Phew..." I let out a long, drawn out sigh, a palate cleanser for the lungs. Old air out, fresh air in. There was nothing I needed to get worked up about here. This was simple. Easy. I was doing it for my sake. For Filia.

I looked my opponent right in the eye. "I'm going to win, Leonir."

"All right, after all that waiting, gentlemugs and ladybucks, are you *hyped*? It's the final match! You've been watching, you've been waiting, you've been screaming and cheering—you know 'em both, and they need no introduction! Challenger Yuri! Veeeeeeeeersus... Challenger Leonir! Now's the time, now's the place! This battle right here and now will decide the toughest motherforker in Rank B and below!"

Ehh, okay, ease off, guy. Being "the toughest in Rank B and below" wasn't an especially thrilling title.

"Ooooh, I remember! Ha! Oh, ya gotta love it," Leonir sneered. "You're that elf's companion, aintcha? I bet you're feelin' a little *animosity*? You've been just fantasizing about takin' me out, big guy. Just droooooooling over it. Ya freak."

Leonir stuck his tongue out and wagged it around. Ick. Didn't let it bother me. I already knew that, despite his decent looks, his personality was rotten to the core. Then again, if we'd faced each other before Filia gave me that talk, I probably would've lost my cool.

Thanks again, Filia.

"Save it. Your mouth reeks," I said to the scum-sucking toejam standing before me.

"The hell did you—? Don't you dare screw with me, gorilla."

"You wish you were half as classy as a gorilla."

"Okay, that settles it, I'm gonna rip your throat out and choke you

to death with it!”

Veins bulged and throbbed on Leonir’s face. Jeez, kids these days could get so hot-headed. Really could use some muscle training. It helps with self-control, keeps you calm—there are so many reasons to try it!

“You ugly hulk, what are ya smilin’ for? Makes me wanna yartzl!”

“Hm?”

Only after I touched my cheeks did I realize the corners of my mouth had curled into a smile. Oops. Even if I tried to stop it, I just couldn’t suppress my inner joy at the prospect of a good fight. It was impossible for me to be truly calm at times like this. Ah well.

“You better give me a fun fight, Leonir!”

“What the hell are ya on about, creep? You’re pissin’ me off!”

Seeing me grin *really* seemed to get his blood boiling. Perfect. Leonir seemed likely to attack at any moment, and frankly, I felt the same way. I glanced over at the master of ceremonies. When was he gonna start us off already? I couldn’t hold back anymore!

Luckily, he looked as though he was *finally* juuuuuust about to give us the go ahead.

“Things are heating up already, with the fighters having a war of words! Folks, we’re about to see an intense battle! Let’s get it started! Final match...begin!”

“HOOAAHHH!”

As I roared, Leonir launched his wind magic blade. I didn’t even try to evade, just let it hit me straight on. Even Filia, with her slender body, had withstood getting hit by this same spell over and over. Of course I could handle it. No sweat.

“Grr, don’t screw with me!”

Leonir swung his sword again and again, launching waves of wind magic. Meh. It was like standing in a spring breeze. All he managed to do was rip my clothes, nothing more. My skin was too thick for little nicks like that.

“Come on, is that all you got? Talk about a letdown,” I muttered as I approached him. Powerful as he was, he just didn’t seem to have a good work ethic. “How disappointing. I really thought you were stronger.”

When Leonir heard me mumbling, his eyes went wide and his blood vessels throbbed.

“You...you’re pissin’ me off... You’re really, really pissing me off! YOU! ARE PISSING ME OOOOOFFFFF!”

Hmm? Leonir gathered an abnormally large mass of incandescent magical energy into his open palm. All at once, it burst into a raging flame.

“I’ll kill you! Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!”

The flame, manipulated by Leonir’s will, shaped into a magic sword. Leonir brandished his eerie burning blade and spoke with all the ecstasy of unbridled rage. “Eh heh. Ah ha ha ha. AH HA HA HA HA HA! I’ll show you the true value of my ‘flame eater’ ability! In the twenty years since it came to me, I’ve drunk so much fire, stolen and stored so many flames away in my spiritual reservoir. But now I’m gonna use ’em, you hear me? I’m gonna use ’em all just to kill you! Be grateful! And die!”

“Aw hell yeah, I’m sure grateful, but I ain’t gonna die!” I exclaimed. I wanted to dance looking at that incredible flame!

Leonir raised his sword high and a pillar of fire shot from it straight into the sky, so tall I thought it might reach the gods.

Twenty years’ worth of fire. No one could handle that much flame all at once. How could I not be over the moon? I gave up on getting in close to Leonir and shifted to a strategy centered on intercepting his oncoming attacks.

However, I knew I couldn’t rely on weaponizing his own attack like I had with Voltemia. Leonir’s techniques were less refined than hers, but his unique ability made up the difference.

“Here I go, muscle head! Die! Hiyahh!” he screamed, firing off a blast from his magic sword. A stream of flames hurtled toward me on a blade of wind, threatening to devour me till there was nothing left.

“HOOAH!”

I met the flames with my Pistol Punch—which the flames swallowed up. They barreled forward without losing a second of momentum.

“Tsk.” I poured power into my entire body, assumed my guard stance, and took the flames head-on. They blazed like hellfire. My skin

crackled. Then the flame burned ever hotter, engulfing my body in screeching heat for a full minute.

“Ee hee hee! Ah ha ha ha! What a douchebag way to go, muscle head! Serves you right!” howled Leonir from the middle of the scorched battlefield. Indescribable exhilaration wavered in his laugh, as if the raging flames burned on the fuel of his pent-up anger.

“Awwww, now that I think of it, what a shame. You can’t die here, huh? Can’t wait to see that stupid face of yours, muscle head, just lyin’ unconscious, smellin’ like cooked meat. What a relief. You were *such* a pain, but nobody’s gonna stand up to my flame! Mwa ha ha!”

“It’s a great flame, I’ll give you that.” I stepped out of the blazing vortex and flashed him a cheerful grin. “I did suffer a few burns here and there, after all.”

Leonir’s face went rigid. “H-huh?! How? How are you still alive?”

“Training, duh. Those flames of yours are seriously great! Come on, bring it on, more! Gimme everything you got! And don’t hold back this time!” I beckoned him with curled fingers. “All this fire stuff’s got me all heated up, you hear me? Come on, come *on*, we haven’t even gotten started, have we?”

“Got you all heated up? You think you’re so funny, don’t you? Fine, if you want to die, then die!”

Leonir swung his sword with reckless abandon, but he wasn’t all talk: each shockwave from his blade was wreathed in flames.

A chill ran down my spine and my smile widened. This was why I just couldn’t stop fighting! Power against power!

This was a feeling I couldn’t describe with words in like, a logical kinda way. That chill running down my spine turned my bones to ice, but it was also bursting into flames, feeding a howling heat within. When I felt like this, I needed to fight.

Without taking a single step, I intercepted every one of the incoming flame sword shockwaves. Just a little cocky—the flames engulfed me once again. It was a good heat. Electrifying. My voltage was goin’ up but I needed more. *More*.

A stronger blow. Put more soul into it. Pour all of your nerves into shot after shot.

I could *feel* it. “HOOOAAAHHH!”

“What the hell is wrong with you? Why aren’t you dodging? Are you a moron?” Leonir sounded shaken. Heh.

“You. I want to take you down head-on. Face to face.” I launched consecutive Pistol Punches.

I’d made up my mind. I wasn’t going to avoid a single one of this guy’s attacks. Filia was watching me from the waiting room, after all. This was a matter of self-respect. I couldn’t run, couldn’t dodge, couldn’t do anything remotely disgraceful in front of Filia.

She’d lost her fight, and a result was a result. I wasn’t going to find any fault with that. However, there was no way I was gonna forgive this guy for ridiculing my partner and going out of his way to hurt her. It was a strange alchemy, the part of my heart that simply loved fighting and the part that yearned to get Filia her revenge. They came together, granting me even more power.

“HOOOOOAAAAHHHH!”

With my excitement at an all-time high, I fired off one Pistol Punch after another. My heart raced, pumping blood all through my body, and bringing oxygen—flammable oxygen—to generate ever more heat for the blaze inside. Another Pistol Punch. Another. Just shooting. The balance was shifting. I moved forward.

“H-huh?! Hey, hey, hey, what the hell! This isn’t right! What are you doing, huh? Twenty years...this is twenty years’ worth of flames! How are you pushing through it?” Leonir cried out, strained and exhausted. “Why won’t you die?!”

My fists pummeled his flames into submission, pushing the stream of fire back farther and farther.

I grinned. “My training—my purpose—outweigh your twenty years. That’s all there is to it.”

My Pistol Punches closed in on Leonir.

“No, no, nonononononono, don’t you *dare* I won’t *let* you I *hate* you, you’ll never—huh?”

And then it happened: Leonir’s flames poofed. His magic sword, which had once blazed halfway to the heavens, sputtered feebly, trailing smoke.

“Why? My flames—c’mon, where are—oh no. No. That was twenty years of...I couldn’t have used ’em all up. Couldn’t have...”

Yeah, okay, buddy. It sure did look like he had. That's what happens when you get too intense and stop thinking, I guess. And here he'd said that was twenty years of fire, all saved up. Would've expected him to have twenty years of restraint to go with it, you know?

"Is that it? Good game," I said.

"Not yet! It ain't over yet! I'll kill ya! I'll slice you to pieces!"

He swung his bare, regular sword. The intimidation I'd felt at first, like being faced with a living scythe, had completely vanished. Guess that was all due to Leonir's ability and not Leonir himself.

I strode toward my opponent until I stood right in front of him.

"What the hell is with you? Ha. Getting...this close to me? Idiot. Choke on this!"

Leonir swung his sword with all of his might. The blade hit my body—and shattered. It snapped against my abdomen, bursting into pieces that clattered to the ground in a pitiful shower of clangs. Last, the sword tip toppled, too. Leonir was no Grim Reaper. With Leonir's pitiful sword skills, he had no chance of doing me damage.

"We done here?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Done. Here. Are we?" I glared at Leonir, who just looked... confused.

"Ah...ah...aha. Ha. Ha?"

"Good to hear it. My turn."

Leonir stood there completely dumbfounded, his sword in shards at his feet. I whacked him as hard as I possibly could with every ounce of force in my body.

KA-CRASH.

Leonir flew into the audience seating area with a hideous crack.

"I-It's over, folks! Challenger Yuri has somehow survived the furious onslaught of Challenger Leonir and emerged victorious! The champion for this year's tournament iiiiiiiss...Challenger! Yuuuuuuriiii!"

Or, the master of ceremonies probably said *some*thin' like that, but I was too absorbed in the aftermath of battle to hear any of it.

Having knocked Leonir so hard he flew into the stands, I called out. “Thank you. I really feel like I’ve gotten stronger.”

From the edge of the battlefield, the earth-magic statue of the Goddess of War gazed down upon me. To me, this Goddess of War looked satisfied, even if she was just an idol. As the crowd cheered, I raised my arm high overhead toward the Goddess.



I was the champion.

Nothing much happened during the closing ceremony, just a few words of appreciation from the big shots who organized the show. Oh, and Babandongas congratulated me.

“Well, I’m still frustrated my little sister didn’t win, but that was a good match,” he said.

That Babandongas. He was an overbearing fella, but damn decent.

As soon as the ceremony was over, I returned to the inn with Filia. Filia jumped onto the bed with a high dynamic dive, all four of her limbs stretched out wide, and hit the sheets with a soft thud.

“That sure was hard work!” she groaned into the pillow. “Oh, and congratulations on becoming the champion!”

“Thanks.”

The tournament had made my heart dance with joy just as I’d dreamed. Fighting those two, Voltemia and Leonir, was nothing if not a blessing. But, well, I had one minor complaint: the length of the closing ceremony.

“I just wanted it to stop, it was so pointless! Honestly, that closing ceremony tired me out way more than the fighting did. There’s nothing fun at all about talking to big shots,” I grumbled.

“I’ll give you the second half.”

“What about the first?”

“Oh, Yuri, I simply cannot understand what you mean.”

Sure, sure. “Ah, yeah, that reminds me. What was the windy thing you did? In your last fight in the tournament? That wind guy?”

“Oh, the ‘Wind God?’ What about it?”

“Hit me with it. It looks interesting.”

“No way! I am utterly drained. Besides, it takes a ridiculously long time to cast, and it’s an imperfect technique,” said Filia, making a face like she’d tasted rotten food.

What a cheapskate.

Wait a minute, had she stood there perfectly still all for the sake of summoning the Wind God? Okay, that was a *little* funny.

“Excuse me? There’s nothing funny about that whatsoever!” snapped Filia.

She had selfishly peeked into my mind again! Hmm. Maybe there was a way I could retaliate...

“Filia, are you still looking into my mind?”

As I asked, I delved into my most wild delusions. My opponent was Filia, of course, and I was going to use my imagination to humiliate her. Specifically, I was going to imagine things like...like us holding hands! Or gazing deeply into each other’s eyes! Or kissi—no, I didn’t think I could envision that without having a heart attack.

I turned to Filia, expecting her face to be bright red...but she’d trapped me.

“Aww, you were planning on trying to fluster me? Ha!” For some reason she was grinning broadly. Huh?

“Didn’t you see? I was imagining us h...” Deep breath, man! “...holding hands! Aren’t y-you...embarrassed?”

Oh crap, oh no. It was *me*. I was the one who was embarrassed! Curses!

“Goodness Yuri, for a bulky musclehead, you’re surprisingly innocent, mm? I think it’s kind of cute,” she said with a wink.

How much longer was she going to make a fool out of me? “Why are you—? This isn’t funny at all! This is...serious business!”

“Aww, come on, it is. You’re a weally naughty boy, awen’t you, Yuri? Wanna hold Filia’s wittle hand?” She wiggled her fingers at me.

“Stop talking like that!”

“Oh, and Yuri?”

“What?”

“Congwatuwations on being the champ.”

“I told you, knock it off with the baby talk already!”

In the end, I was completely annihilated. Innocent? No way! Filia was beyond mature for her age.

The day after the magic battle tournament was clear and cloudless, and Filia and I were walking through Mussen Morgeth. We needed to buy new clothes for Filia after hers got wrecked during her fight with Leonir.

“Come on, hurry up, let’s go, Yuri!” Filia skipped in front of me through the crowded street.

“It’s rare to see you in such a hurry, Filia.”

She kind of always went at her own pace, lingering here and there. If anything, she was always holding me back.

Filia tugged on the neck of her borrowed clothes—mine, to be precise. “That’s because your outfits are way too loose, Yuri. I want to hurry up and get stuff that actually fits.”

“I suppose we’re pretty different sizes.”

In addition, I always wore clothes a bit larger than my body in case I had to release my muscles and grow a couple feet. You’d expect my clothes to look a little off on her given they were way too baggy, but it ended up being a good look. She really could make anything work.

It really wasn’t fair at all! My loose shirt reached all the way down to Filia’s knees, hiding the shorts she wore underneath. It had basically turned into a short dress, and everyone who passed noticed her pale thighs peeking out from the hem. Every time the wind fluttered her clothes, the men around us oh-so-conveniently turned their heads to look.

“What’s the matter?” asked Filia. She hadn’t noticed the creep squad, apparently.

“Nothing, it’s no big deal. Let’s get going.”

“Yeah, let’s go! Clothes quest, clothes quest, CLOTHES QUEST!”

Even though everyone we passed was focused on Filia, for some reason I was the one feeling uncomfortable. I picked up the pace and hurried toward the clothing store.

We went to a store that was a sister store to the one we’d visited in Astarte. It probably would’ve been fine to go somewhere else, but why would we?

"It hardly needs to be asked, but you *are* going to buy it for me, won't you, my Yuri?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll buy it for you." I had promised to, after all.

Filia flashed a bewitching smile and touched a finger to her pink lips. "Hmm, I wonder if I should choose the most expensive thing in the store?"

"You're merciless."

My smile strained when I remembered the outfit on display near the entrance of the shop, called a "pure gold dress" or something. I wasn't sure if anyone would even buy that glitzy thing, but I *was* sure even I didn't have the money. But as a man, I couldn't go back on a promise after I'd made it, so—

"I'm joking, Yuri. I'd like this one, if you would."

While I'd been agonizing, Filia picked an outfit nearby, chuckling. The clothing in her hands was exactly the same as the ones she'd had before: a sleeveless dress with a white base and pink vest.

"Are you really okay with the same outfit?" I asked.

I had thought for sure she would pick something different, but... no, she nodded deeply. "Yes. I want this one."

And so I bought the outfit for her. I'd promised, Filia wanted it, and there wasn't anything left to say. Besides, she'd taken a liking to the outfit I'd picked for her. How could I complain about that?

Afterward, I hunted for some more clothing to add to my oft-destroyed wardrobe. After finding one that looked especially eye-catching, I turned to Filia for her opinion.

"Hey, Filia. What do you think about this?"

"Which one?"

The outfit in question was sleeveless black with all kinds of straps, and had clear openings around the stomach and back that would leave my rockin' abs exposed. It was also constructed in such a way that it wouldn't be torn apart if I expanded my muscles, and that was a huge plus. If I *had* to complain about anything, it was that it didn't really look like actual clothing.

"Whaddya think? Pretty wild, huh?"

"Wild is certainly a...word. I see your wild and raise it to 'crazy.'"

Your taste is simply hopeless, Yuri. Is that even an outfit? It looks like a...strip of cloth, almost.”

I thought it was nice, but it wouldn't be right to make my partner uncomfortable with whatever I was wearing, so I couldn't go ahead with it.

Hold on, why was I worrying about my partner like this?

“Not only am I an intellectual muscle man,” I mused, “I have become quite the *gentle-muscle-man*.”

“Packing an awful lot of mystery into a couple sentences, mm?” Filia chuckled.

After I bought some of my own clothes, Filia changed into her new ones right away. It wouldn't be good for my mental well-being if she were wearing my clothes forever, after all. When Filia stepped out of the dressing room, she was dressed in her now-typical outfit, that white and pink dress with green ruffles at the shoulders, thigh-high socks, and her hair done up with pink ribbon. It felt weird when she *didn't* wear that nowadays.

“What do you think? Does it look good on me?” asked Filia, twirling once.

“It's the same exact outfit you've been wearing for months.”

“That's not,” she said sharply, “what I asked. I *asked* you if it looks good on me. Does it?”

“I mean, yeah, it looks good on you, don't you think?” I didn't really know much about fashion, but most things looked good on her. Of *course* this outfit looked good on her, too.

Filia shook her head. “No, there's no ‘Don't you think?’ I want to hear you say if it looks good on me or if it doesn't.”

“It looks good on you.”

“He he he, well, of course! How could it not? This is me we're talking about, after all!” Filia declared, grinning smugly and puffing out her chest.

Jeez, she could really go zero-to-a-hundred.

With Filia changed, we left the store. Filia walked the city streets with a bounce in her step, elated by her new clothes. Each time she bobbed up and down, her silver hair swayed with her.

It bothered me a bit, actually. Her hair was all spiked up, like springing around. Maybe her hair got all rustled when she got dressed.

“Filia?”

“Yes, what is it?”

After Filia stopped, I patted her hair down, trying to flatten it. The hair muss was kind of charming, but it would probably embarrass her. Noticing this stuff was just one more thing that made me a gentle-muscle-man.

“You had some bedhead going on, hair sticking up and such.” Pat, pat... “You’re surprisingly oblivious to this kind of stuff, huh?”

“Ah...th-thanks...”

“What? You suddenly just got all meek.”

“You’re such a cheater, Yuri,” said Filia, facing the ground but glaring up at me.

“Cheater?” I didn’t get it at all. A cheater? I never skipped out on training or responsibilities or anything, did I?

“Yes, a cheater! As a matter of fact, I’m mad at you. Yuri, you shall now give me your hand.”

“I don’t really get it, but sure.”

Filia said she was angry, but she didn’t really look it. I offered my hand to her.

And Filia put her soft hand in mine. I froze, unsure of what to do. Filia held onto my hand and cheerfully pulled me along with her.

“H-hey, you...” I stammered.

“He he he. This is payback,” said Filia, but her face was turning strawberry-red. It was captivating. On top of that, I could really feel the softness of her palms, since we were skin-to-skin!

“Y-Yuri, this might be a little too much for you to handle, huh?” It almost seemed like Filia was a bit flustered herself, but my own mental state was already not...calm. Compose yourself! Be calm, me!

I was already being teased, but if Filia found out that I was flustered, she’d tease me more than ever. I needed something to focus on to distract myself from all—whatever this was. Now why did Filia suddenly decide to grab my hand in the first place?

Let's see—aha! That had to be it! I raised my brow. "Pretty slick, Filia...this is a game, right? To see which of us has a stronger mind?"

Now *that* I could make sense of! And if that was how it was going to be, I had no intention of losing.

"Pardon me?"

"There's no point playing dumb. While it's certainly true I'm not very good at this kind of contest, I'm not about to give in!"

Even though I was flustered, I shook Filia's hand. No way I'd lose!

"A new kind of training, I see! I accept your challenge!"

"Yuri, your thought processes are really, uh. Something else. Can't you do anything without trying to turn it into training?"

"What? If this isn't training, what is it?"

"Th-this is...well, it's that. *That*." She turned away with a huff, trying to dodge the question. Even seeing her from the side though, I could make out her cheeks going from pink to red.

Too many unanswered mysteries! I spun around to face her.

"What is 'that'?"

"Th-that is that. Let's just drop this," said Filia, suddenly letting go of my hand.

"Huh? Victory's mine! How about that, eh? Gotcha!"

"Yuri, you really are just happy to be alive, huh?" muttered Filia.

Whoa, come on, it was just a game, wasn't it? No need to be a sore loser.

Just then, a guy dashed past us. He sure seemed like he was in a hurry.

"Thief! Please, someone catch him!" a woman cried.

"Don't you dare come after me! If you do, I'll kill ya!" the guy snarled, wielding a knife.

He ran on ahead of us. A thief, huh? You really shouldn't steal people's stuff. I'd have to give him a little scolding, rake him over the coals a bit. On a personal note though, I hoped he was strong.

"Whoa, Yuri, you're looking fired up..."

"I'm gonna catch him!"

With that, I bolted forward and skidded to a halt in front of the man.

“What’s with you?” he snapped. “Where’d you come from?! Move it or I’ll kill ya!”

“If you think you can kill me, go ahead and try.”

“H-hiyaah!”

He swung his blade haphazardly and actually managed to get a hit in. Of course, it wasn’t like something so blunt and dull as that pointy metal twig could do anything, not to my muscles.

“Huh? O-ow, it hurts!”

On the contrary, it looked like this guy was suffering a little from reverb.

“Is that all you’ve got? Come on, if you got magic or something, try hittin’ me with that.”

“Y-you’re a monster!”

Shaking like a leaf, the man turned on his heel and started running back the way he’d come. I wasn’t going to let him.

“Hooaaaahh!”

With a warrior’s bellow, I fired a Pistol Punch at the man’s back.

“Gahh...?”

My attack hit the man square in the back and it completely blew him away. Before long, Mussen Morgeth’s knight order came running and hauled him away. Aww. What a disappointing fight. When the commotion died down, Filia strolled up to me.

“Good work!”

“I don’t know if I’d call that ‘work.’”

Over in an instant, and I was completely unscathed. Oh well.

Filia examined the place where the knife had struck my body, but when she realized I wasn’t hurt, she patted my chest. I was grateful she was worried about me all the same. “Yuri, I’m surprised you took on someone with a knife without hesitating. I would’ve, even if just for a moment.”

“Does that really matter? In the end, a knife is just an eating utensil, right?”

“Sure, all knives are just eating utensils.” Filia shook her head. “It’s not often someone strings together a statement so completely out there. Just the sort of thing I expect from you, Yuri.”

Awww, I didn’t need more praise. What if it got to my head?

The woman who had been robbed came up to me then. She bowed her head. “Oh, young sir, th-thank you very much!”

“Don’t worry about it. It was fun.”

Filia rolled her eyes. “Yuri, you really can’t resist fighting, can you?”

Ugh, saying that in front of the lady, too? Even if she was completely, absolutely right! So rude!

“Even still, I was so shocked,” said the woman. “You used wind magic to catch that thief so quickly...”

Someone had the wrong idea again, eh? I couldn’t let that stand. This was my chance to tell her about the splendor of muscles. Time to set the record straight!

“Wind magic? Oh no, that wasn’t wind magic or anythin’.” I smacked my chest with a thud. It was the fruit of my labors, the combination of sweat, hard work, and muscle. And it made me capable of the type of magic only those who had tempered their muscles to the extreme could handle. In other words: “Muscle magic!”

Bonus Chapter 1: Contradictions and Muscles

“HEY YURI, can I ask you a small question?” asked Filia rather suddenly.

A few days had passed since the tournament and we’d picked up our brand-new clothes.

“A question? Oh, sure. You can ask an intellectual muscle man like myself anything, bring it on!” I replied. This was my chance to show off just how erudite I was! I was terribly eager.

“Yuri, you really are a musclehead, aren’t you?”

“H-hey. What’s this about? Don’t compliment me like that so suddenly.” It was making me downright bashful.

“No, I’m not complimenting you, I—well, whatever. Still, you are oddly intellectual, aren’t you?”

“Yep.” An intellectual muscle man, to be more precise. Though I guess you could, uh, just say “intellectual” and

get the point across. Eh, whatever! Wait, what were we talking about again?

Just as I started to spiral, Filia finally hit me with her question. “Simply put, Yuri...if you’re truly a musclehead, how could you be an intellectual? Aren’t those mutually exclusive?”

What, that was really it? Simple stuff. I released my muscles. “No, see, I’m a musclehead *and* an intellectual. Because I’ve trained.”

Oh yeah, check out these babies. Surely she could hear the muscles advocating together, every flex an unstoppable argument, echoing out across the room! Every single one of them an insightful intellectual!

“If you train,” I continued, “you can beat contradiction. That’s the amazing thing about muscles!”

“You can’t beat a rhetorical concept with muscles,” said Filia, “no matter how hard you train.”

Could she not hear the muscles sing? I guess I just hadn’t made

enough effort yet. Even so...contradiction was an interesting word to use, huh?

“Filia, are you at that age where you want to use difficult words to show off? Did you just want to use the word ‘contradiction’ in a sentence?”

“But contradiction isn’t really a—oh, I get it. It a difficult word for you, Yuri, eh?”

Combo breaker and a counter! I’d intended to rile her up, but she turned it against me so effortlessly... What a blunder for an intellectual muscle man.

“Grr, w-well, that’s...”

When Filia saw me stammer, she grinned victoriously. She gently patted my head, then, with a look of overwrought affection on her face, said, “Aww, there, there, I’ll teach my little man how to study, okay?”

What a jerk! Acting so triumphant... “Ugh, whatever! I am *too* an intellectual muscle man! I don’t care what anyone says, because I *am* an intellectual muscle man!”

“Yep, yep, so amazing, so amazing. You’re a big stwong intellectual, aren’t you, Yuri? Wow, I wespect you soooo much!”

“Hey! Stop making fun of me!”

“Eh he he. Sorry, it’s just so irressistible sometimes.”

The sheer humiliation! What a loathsome personality...

Filia sighed. “Hmm, I suppose I did go a little too far there. As my way of apologizing, I’ll agree that you’re both a musclehead and an intellectual. You’ve convinced me, Yuri.”

“Really? Oh, thank you so so so so so much, Filia!”

I knew it all along, Filia really was a super great person after all!

Bonus Chapter 2: Competition on the Same Level

“OH NO, DON'T, this is so embarrassing. Completely embarrassing, infinitely embarassiiiiiiing!”

Filia's voice went on and on inside the room. Filia had uttered the word “embarrassed” like a million times already and just kept repeating it. I didn't get it at all.

Actually, it was a little scary.

“I'm so embarrassed! I'm so embaraaaaaaassed!”

Filia stopped walking aimlessly back and forth in the room only to approach me.

“Yuri,” Filia announced, “I! Am embarrassed now.”

“Okay, what's the matter with you all of the sudden? Is your head okay?” Had she finally lost her mind? I was getting worried.

Filia opened her palm and extended her arm. “Yuri, here! Behold!”

“Hm? What's with this? What are you doing with your hand?”

“You must pay the embarrassment fee.”

“The...the what?”

I'd never heard of an embarrassment fee before. But Filia just brimmed with self-confidence there, standing tall in front of me.

“You don't get to see the embarrassed face of a gorgeous girl—such as yours truly—very often. In a way, I've provided you with a rare service. In exchange, I demand fair wages, Yuri!”

Whoa. Her mind was a real twisty place, wasn't it? But then again... “By that logic, you gotta pay me a muscle fee. I mean, you rarely get to see such marvelous muscles, right?”

I released my muscles and upon my command every muscle in my body—my beautiful fleshy armor—bulged and swelled. Mmhm. What wonderful allure. These muscles really just felt like *muscles*.

“Ha, what a—oh dear, are you *serious*? How sad! Why would I pay

a muscle fee, Yuri? I mean really, you just show off your body to me alllll the time, and now you have the audacity to ask me for money? You're either crazy or you think I am."

That wasn't exactly something I wanted to hear her say when she was the one asking for an embarrassment fee.

"Honestly, I think you are. Here, you can have your words back," I said.

"Oh, but you can't! No returns, no refunds."

"What? Take them back."

"I can barely hear you, Yuri! Look, I've put up a barrier. Everything's muffled! Blah, blah, blah, muscles. It sounds like *that's* what you're saying." Filia spread both of her arms out wide.

A barrier? Ha! How naïve!

"Barrier? My muscle magic will smash through!"

My muscle magic couldn't be fended off by something as uncool as a barrier or whatever! But Filia didn't look the least bit worried.

"Oh ho ho, you're wasting your time! Why's that, you wonder? Because this is a muscle-magic-nullifying barrier!" she said, cackling like a witch.

"Isn't that unfair? Damn it! Well then, if that's the way you want it..." I took a deep breath. "Then I'll just have to use my muscle-magic-nullifying-barrier-nullifying muscle magic!"

"Your *what*? Okay then, fine! I'll just have to use my muscle-magic-nullifying-barrier-nullifying-muscle-magic-nullifying-barrier-nullifying—"

This continued for a while. It was not a good use of our time.



MUSCLES ARE BETTER THAN MAGIC
CHARACTER DESIGN



YURI



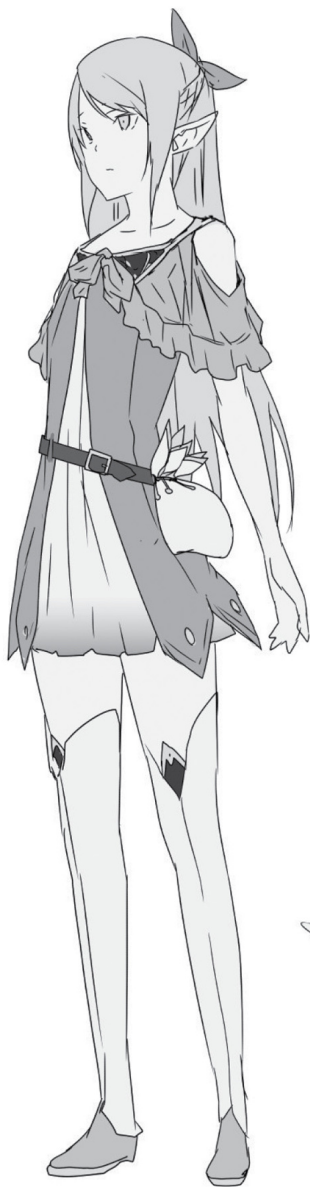


 **VOLTEZIA**



CHARACTER DESIGN

 FILIA





GRIM REAPER



CHARACTER DESIGN



 **BABANDONGAS**



DORANEKO

AUTHOR PROFILE

Lives in Saitama prefecture.

This got started on *Let's Be Novelists*. Doraneko started writing because he thought he would enjoy giving shape to his imagination and fantasies. Since then, he's steadily fallen in love with writing as a profession; he's captivated. In 2017, *Muscles Are Better than Magic* made its debut, published by MF Books.

He also said, "I wrote this book to make people laugh and give them a good time." His hobbies include listening to music and reading. He especially loves manga.



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